

I have to be honest. When I hear this parable of the laborers in the vineyard, I identify with the first group, those who worked all day long in the vineyard. And I think that is what Jesus means to happen. Jesus tells this parable, I believe, partly to disturb us, or at least to grab our attention, and partly to reveal the Father to us. At first Jesus intends to create a tension within the listener, to arouse a certain feeling. Something just seems wrong to us, when people who work a full day are paid the same amount as those who work only one hour. Wouldn't it be great to get paid a day's wage for doing only a small fraction of a day's work? Nice work if you can get it. But I wouldn't be so happy if I was the one who had worked all day and gotten paid the same as the person who worked only one hour. It doesn't seem fair. It goes against our expectations, just like it did for that group of workers.

And that's one of the things Jesus means for us to see in this parable. On the one hand, He means to shed light on the fact that we have within us some sense of fairness, some value that we expect others to know about and to comply with. Even when that other person is God. On the other hand, what we are to notice in this parable is the mercy and compassion of the owner of the vineyard, who represents God. It's likely that we may not notice this right off. Instead what jumps right out at us, at least it did me, is the unfairness of the pay. Jesus wants us to see that our expectations rest not upon God and His character and trustworthiness, but upon some principle of fairness, some cultural value.

Now that's not to say that we are meant to completely disregard all sense of value and fairness in our dealings with other people as members of society. Of course we are not being taught in this parable to be unfair and unjust. In fact, the lesson of this parable is about us only to the extent that our expectations and values, which are often culturally conditioned, do not always translate directly into the Kingdom of God. Once again, this parable begins with Jesus saying, "the kingdom of heaven is like". That preface should alert to us that a sharp distinction is about to be made. In the kingdom of heaven, it is often the case that earthly values are either reversed or transcended. As Jesus says, for example, the last will be first and the first, last.

And as we may have come to expect, there is a great deal of background to this parable that we need to know in order to get the full impact. As is so often the case, what most likely was very clear and striking to the original listeners and readers, escapes our notice.

The situation described in this parable is not purely imaginary. That is, apart from the method of payment, this way of hiring men out for day labor happened frequently at certain times in Palestine. In that part of the world the grape harvest ripens near the end of September. Very soon afterwards came the rainy season. If the grapes were not harvested before the rains came, the crop would be ruined. That made the harvest of the vineyard a race against time. Any and all workers were welcome, even if they could only work for a short time.

The rate of pay was also typical of that time and place. The problem was, even considering the value of one denarius in today's terms, it was a very meager compensation. Men with families were hard pressed to earn a decent living on such wages. But it was still better than nothing.

These men were day laborers, the lowest class in the workforce. They would go to the market place first thing each morning, carrying whatever tools they may use, and hope to be hired on for that day. In comparison to slaves and servants, who were at least to some extent regarded as part of a family, these day laborers struggled desperately. Servants and slaves benefited from being attached to a family; their standard of living was more secure because of it. These day workers were on their own. They lived from day to day, always dangerously close to starvation. They were always at the mercy of chance employment, never knowing from day to day where they might be working, or for whom. The standard pay rate of a denarius a day was barely enough to keep their standard of living just above subsistence level. If they were to miss a day of work, mother and baby at home would have to go hungry. There wasn't much left for savings when you lived on a denarius a day. To go unemployed for even one day was disastrous.

And so these men who were standing in the market place until the eleventh hour were not slackers, they were not lazy bums who were avoiding work. To the contrary, they waited all day long there at the market place in the hope that someone would eventually hire them. If they

wanted to avoid work, they would have gone somewhere else. But knowing that the grape harvest had to be brought in quickly, they stayed there at the market place waiting for someone to hire them.

It was out of his great compassion that the vineyard owner hired these men at the last hour. He could not bear to see them standing idle, knowing what that meant for them: no work means no wages, which means no meal for the family that evening. Furthermore, to give these last-hour men less than a denarius wouldn't do them much good, either. And so the vineyard owner extended to them a day's wage for doing less than a day's work.

Now notice the difference in how the groups of workers are depicted. The group that was hired first, early in the morning had an agreement with the vineyard owner. We might say they had a contract, albeit a verbal one. He told the next groups, hired later in the day, that he would give them whatever is right. In the case of the eleventh-hour group, neither the workers themselves nor the vineyard owner make any mention of compensation. The eleventh-hour group goes to work in the vineyard in total trust of the vineyard owner and completely at his mercy. They left the matter of compensation to him. Apparently they were happy just to have the opportunity to do *something* that day.

Now the great lesson of this parable is about the grace of God. All that God gives is from His grace. These eleventh-hour workers did not earn the full day's wage of a denarius. Yet the vineyard owner gave it to them. And so it is with us, when we receive gifts from God. The

Christian life is not a matter of compensation. We cannot enter into a contract with God. We cannot put God in our debt.

The nature of God's grace is also revealed in the behavior of the eleventh-hour workers. God gives His grace to those who are empty enough to receive it. The first group of workers felt they were treated unfairly when they saw that the others who worked only one hour received the same pay as they did. But the vineyard owner did not actually treat them unjustly. He kept his word to them: if they would work in his vineyard that day, he would pay them a denarius each. And so he did.

Life in the kingdom of heaven is not about keeping track of what you've got coming to you. Just prior to this parable in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is teaching the disciples about how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. And Peter reminds Jesus that each of the disciples has left everything to follow Him, and then asks him, "what's in it for us?" And Jesus answers that everyone who has left everything to follow him will have great rewards in heaven and eternal life. Jesus follows with this parable to show how Peter's concern doesn't fit the kingdom of heaven.

The workers hired first have this same sort of "what's in it for us" attitude. That is not the kind of character trait that Jesus wants to exemplify. Jesus tells this parable so that we will see in it something of the nature and character of God, and especially his grace.

Another thing to notice is that when God gives us the gift of His grace, it is always sufficient for whatever is at hand. All the workers in

this parable had a great need. The others who were hired earlier in the day were able to feel at least a little more secure, if only for that day because they were working and could expect to be paid. By the eleventh hour, things had now become quite desperate for those workers who had not yet been hired. The compassionate vineyard owner came along just in time and was gracious enough to give them what they needed regardless of the fact that they were only able to work one hour.

God gives us His grace at the exact time we need it and for the precise length of time that we need it. Notice that the vineyard owner doesn't set up each of the eleventh hour workers with a trust fund so that they can live happily and comfortably for the rest of their lives without ever having to work another day. He gives them what they need for that day. The implication is that God gives His grace on a case by case basis, and not once for a lifetime. The Our Father says "Give us this day our *daily* bread." We're to live one day at a time, on the daily provision of God's grace.

So the kingdom of heaven operates on a different economy, God's economy. Earthly expectations of fairness and due compensation will most likely go unmet there. We go into God's kingdom and serve Him without a contract. We have something greater than a contract in the kingdom of heaven. We have a God who gives us great gifts and takes care of us purely out of His grace and compassion.