

“First come first served.” (5)

A few weeks ago we looked at “**The parable of the wicked tenants**” and we saw how God left them in charge of His vineyard and gave them everything they needed to do the work required within it. Today we are going to see that everyone He calls upon is entitled to work in His vineyard, no matter where they are from or when they decided to listen to His call.

We’re just going straight into the text today, and we’re going to look at the parable of “**The workers in the vineyard**” and we are going to learn that it’s not always a case of “**First come, first served**”. In a world where everyone wants service now, there’s a real lack of humility. People don’t save up for anything anymore, if they see something they like, they just go ahead and buy it no matter how much debt they get into. You can’t even pay for your shopping bill sometimes because people are too busy trying to be first in the queue.

The attitude of the world is one of expectations, **isn’t it?** People expect to be served first in a restaurant even though there is already a queue. People expect to be treated better than others, especially if they are in a position of importance. The queen would expect to be served first where ever she went. If war broke out in Britain, the common people would be last to be provided with a place of safety. But the point I’m trying to make is this, humility is not just something that Christian’s practice; humility is the lifestyle of a Christian.

Now before we begin to find out what Jesus was trying to say in this parable we first need to understand the background to it. In **Matthew 19:16-25** we find a rich young man who came to Jesus and asked Him what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him, “**Obey the commandments.**” But the young man asks, “**Which ones?**”

And so Jesus said to him, “**Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself.**” And the young man said, “**I have kept them all**”, and then he asked Jesus, “**What do I lack**” and so Jesus tells him. He says, “**If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**”

But this was too much to ask of him, so the young man went away sad, because he was rich. And then Jesus talks to His disciples about how hard it is for rich people to inherit eternal life and then He goes on to talk about how people can be saved.

He says in **Matthew 19:26-30** “**With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.**” Peter answered him, “**We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?**” Jesus said to them, “**I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.**”

And it’s then that Jesus goes on to tell the parable of “**The workers in the vineyard**” in **Matthew 20:1-16**.

Two friends who hadn't seen each other in years met in a supermarket. One woman asked, "Tell me, Ruth, how is your son, George?" "He's getting along fine," Ruth replied. "He's a poet. He just received his master's degree in Literature from the university." "And what about Mary?" "She's just as smart as George," Ruth replied. "She graduated from college with a degree in Modern Art." "Wonderful! And how is little Freddy? What is he doing?" "Well," Ruth said, "Freddy is still Freddy. He wouldn't go to college; he became a plumber, instead. If it weren't for him, we'd all be starving."

And the point is, that it doesn’t matter what work you do in the kingdom, what matters is the way you work. The issue in this parable is not how long the people worked in the Lord’s vineyard; the issue in this parable is the spirit in which the work was done.

Notice that there are **two types** of workers in God’s vineyard. **1.** Those who came to an agreement with the master. Jesus said in **Matthew 20:1+2** “**For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.**”

Basically they said they would work for Him if they were given the right amount of money. So these first labourers were given a contract, a denarius for a days work.

2. We have those who came to work for Him later. Jesus says in [Matthew 20:3-7](#) "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered." He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'"

The difference between these guys and those who had an agreement is that they were thankful and glad just for the chance to work. And their pay wasn't an issue because Jesus said, "He would pay them what was right." You know it's sad when people think they will only work for God if they get paid enough for it. Now there are some of us who get financial support to come and work with a congregation. But that doesn't mean that they have to do all the work, just because they get paid for it.

That's not the point of this parable because they didn't get their pay until their work was finished. And remember that Jesus isn't talking about actually receiving a denarius when we get to heaven. He's revealing a spiritual and moral truth to His disciples, He's saying that your reward will be the same as mine and that reward is eternal life. A Christian doesn't work in God's kingdom for the money, a Christian works in God's kingdom for the joy.

[Proverbs 10:27+28](#) "The fear of the Lord adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short. The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing."

[1 Peter 1:8+9](#) "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls." It's a joy to serve and work for the Lord; we all work for Him because of the joy we get out of serving our Lord in His kingdom.

I heard a story about someone who stole some wheel nuts from one of the wheels from this man's car and so the man went to a used-car dealer to get more wheel nuts. He asked the mechanic, "Could you give me two wheel nuts for my Lada?" "Sure," he replied. "Sounds like a fair exchange."

And the point is when it comes to inheriting eternal life; nobody is going to get ripped off, whether they've been a Christian for one day or 50 years. Now we all know that Jesus' disciples were the first Christians into Jesus' church and in [Acts 2:41](#) we find that others were added and became a part of His church. And in [Acts 5:14](#) we find that even more people were added and became a part of His church.

But Jesus' disciples had to learn a hard lesson. **First come doesn't mean first served!** And so Jesus explains what He meant when He said to His disciples about their position of honour in [Matthew 19:26-30](#). But the point that Jesus is telling them, is that the disciples couldn't claim any special place of honour just because they were Christians before anyone else.

He says in [Matthew 20:16](#) "The last will be first, and the first will be last." And there's a big lesson for the church today here too, **isn't there?** Too many people just because they have been members of the Lord's church for many years, think that the church partially belongs to them. They think they can dictate and control what goes on within the church.

Just because you've been a member of the Lord's church for **40 years** doesn't give you any special privileges. Just because your father was an elder of a church for **20 years** doesn't give you any special privileges. And just because your mother was a missionary and helped poor people all her life doesn't give you any special privileges. In the church, authority doesn't necessarily mean honour.

Now I'm not saying don't honour those who have been in the Lord's church for many years because the Bible teaches us that we should honour those who are older in the faith. I'm saying just because you've been a part of the kingdom longer than some other people, doesn't make you more important than any other Christian. No matter where you come from or when you became a Christian, you are of equal worth to God as any other Christian.

Now remember it's God's vineyard, it's God whose dishing out the wages, He's the one doing the hiring, it's His work that's being done. You're the worker and He's the owner. But the point is that it doesn't matter if you've been a Christian for one hour or 40 years, you are of equal worth to God in His kingdom.

Galatians 3:26-28 “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Those who are young in the faith should learn from those who are older and more mature and whose knowledge is greater but, and this is important. It may well be that those who have been Christians for a long time have got much to learn from those who are younger in the faith too. You see that was the problem the Jews had, they knew that they were God’s chosen people and they never forgot that. And it’s because of this; they continually looked down on the Gentiles.

They hated and despised the Gentiles and hoped for nothing but their destruction. And so to a Jew if the Gentiles were going to be allowed into God’s kingdom, they must come in as inferiors and on their terms. In Acts 15:1 we find some Jews saying to the Gentiles, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

We also know that the apostle Peter found this difficult to deal with. Paul had to rebuke him for that mindset and he tells us in Galatians 2:14 “When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” The Jews were willing to allow the Gentiles into God’s kingdom only if they were circumcised and followed their traditions.

And that spirit hasn’t changed much in some religious circles, has it? You can only be a part of the church if you were baptised by a church of Christ minster! You are only a Christian if you know and fully understand all the doctrine of the church of Christ before you were baptised! You will only be get to heaven if you use this translation or this song book or use one cup during communion!

And so these people think they are more favoured in God’s eyes, because we don’t match up to their level of spirituality. But as someone once said, “In God’s economy, there is no such thing as a most favoured nation clause.” There is no master race in Christianity. “All are one in Christ Jesus.” As Paul reminded us in Galatians 3:28. Instead of looking around at each other and wondering whose doing what in the kingdom, maybe we should be looking out for those who are eager to work in the kingdom.

You see these men who were standing in the market place weren’t being lazy hanging around the street corners wasting their time. They didn’t have a local job centre to go to like we have today; the market place was the place to go to find work. A man would go there first thing in the morning with his tools and he would wait until someone came along and hired him.

And so some of them would get hired first thing in the morning but others would wait all day to get some work. Some men worked only a few hours and some men worked all day. And when I say all day, I don’t mean a 9-5 job. I mean these guys started at 6:00am and finished at 6:00pm. And even though work usually finished at 6:00pm some of these men would still be waiting until 5:00pm hoping to get a job.

Jesus said the landowner went in the morning, then the third hour, and then the sixth hour and then the ninth hour and then finally he went again to the market place at the eleventh hour. This shows how desperate they were, they were still there waiting in the market place, desperate for work.

We go out of our way to encourage people to read the Bible, so that they might become Christians. Maybe we should continue that encouragement in helping them find a job within the kingdom of God after they have become Christians.

This parable also tells us about the generosity of God. Matthew 20:8-10 “When 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.’ “The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.”

These men didn’t all do the same work, but they did receive the same pay. Now the way the world works when it comes to pay is this, some people get more pay than others depending on the jobs they have.

But usually if people work in the same place and do the same job for the same length of time, they expect to get the same pay. But these workers didn't all work the same hours, you see these workers were grape pickers to a degree.

And the grapes in Palestine would always be ready for harvest and be ripe around the end of September. And it was always a race against time to get the grapes in before the rains came. And so because of this, anyone who was willing to work was welcome to work at this time, even if they could only give an hour or two's work.

You see each man was given a denarius, which was around a day's wages for a man back then. And so because a job was hard to come by, getting a job for a day's wages sometimes meant the difference between living and starving. But God knew that a denarius was no great wage, He knew that if the workmen went home with less than a denarius there would be worried wives and hungry children.

If this happened in today's world, people would instantly go to a solicitor and say I want justice. This parable tells us that God goes beyond justice and gives us more than we are due. Justice says that we deserve to die in our sin; God goes beyond justice and offers us eternal life through His Son Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:3-5 "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved."

And when it comes to God's justice and the way He gives His grace to people, there are **two great lessons** to be learned. **1. All service ranks the same with God.**

It's not the amount of service that counts but the love in which it is given. **Matthew 20:11+12** "When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.' 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.'"

You can always tell the people who think they deserve more from God than their fellow brothers or sisters in the kingdom of God. You can tell because they grumble a lot and people are always grumbling against God. Not only in today's world but also in the Biblical world.

Exodus 16:2 "In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron". And even after they received the Promised Land they grumbled. **Psalms 106:24+25** "Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise. They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord."

We shouldn't grumble about the amount of work a Christian is doing or not doing in the kingdom. **James 5:8+9** "You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"

We should be patient and grateful for the little work that they are doing. God doesn't look at the amount of work given, so long as our service is all we have to give. In fact, ask yourself this question, **what's worth more? A millionaire giving you £100 or a child giving you a card on your birthday that just cost a few pence but they have saved up for that card lovingly for months?** All service ranks the same with God.

2. All God gives is grace. **Matthew 20:13-16** "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'"

We cannot earn what God gives us, we cannot deserve it and we cannot put God in our debt. People are always trying to put God in their debt, people are always trying to say to God who deserves to go to heaven and who doesn't. You know when you talk to non-Christians about the kind of people you find in church, they seem to think that we've always been in the church. We've always been God fearing people, but people aren't born Christians, they are born again Christians. Jesus told Nicodemus in **John 3:3-8** that people need to be born again to enter the kingdom in the first place. Peter says that you need to be born again to be purified.

1 Peter 1:21-23 “Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”

Purified from what? From our sin, all Christians have history because nobody comes to the cross, sinless. What right do we have to say to God, “Hey God that person is a rapist; they don’t deserve to get to heaven?” “Hey God, that person is a murderer, they don’t have any right in your kingdom?” Because when we look at others with that attitude, He will just say to us what He said in the parable, “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Let me share with you the kind of people you will find in the church. Galatians 5:19-21 tells us that there are people who used to commit “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery.” There are people who used to commit “idolatry and people who used to practice witchcraft”. There are people who used to be filled with “hatred, discord, jealousy, they had fits of rage, they were selfish in their ambition”. They used to practice “dissensions, factions and envy, they were always drunk, they got involved in orgies, and the like”. You go and tell that to the average person on the street and they would say, “Well I’m not going to that church, they have allsorts in there”.

But the point is that the people in the church used to do these things. Past tense they used to but when they were born again, they put off that old nature and put on that new nature. Instead of following the ways of the world, they turned and started following the ways of Christ. Why? Galatians 5:21 “Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

So now that we understand why we needed saving so much because of our sinful lives, we should never say that no one is good enough for God’s kingdom. Romans 3:22-24 “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

I remember hearing a story about the great preacher G Campbell Morgan and he was walking home one night with his friend when they noticed this man walking home drunk out of his mind. His friend said, “What a sorrowful state to get in.” And Morgan replied, “But for the grace of God go I.” What God gives us is given out of the goodness of His heart, out of His grace. And what He gives us is not pay, but a gift, not a reward but a grace.

A man named John Newtown knows all about grace, now you may not know who he is, but you should know the famous hymns which he wrote and we still sing today. It’s called “Amazing grace” and the first stanza says this, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Ephesians 2:1-9 “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.”

That’s grace, that’s amazing and it’s a gift of God so that no one can stand before God or other people and say, “Look how great I am, look what I do as a Christian.” It’s a gift, which cannot be earned by yourself, so that no one can boast. And it’s available to everyone who is willing to obey the gospel call of Christ.

I don’t care who you are, where you come from or how ugly your past has been because you’ll be in good company here. God wants you to inherit eternal life as much as the person sitting next to you today. And maybe then you too, will be able to sing with us and come to understand why God’s grace is so amazing.