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The Laborers in the Vineyard

Matthew 19:27-20:16

Impatient men often try to anticipate what God would do or ought to do; and just as routinely God demonstrates that He has something very different in mind. “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord.*” (Isaiah 55)

Jesus spent a lot of time correcting men’s impatient efforts to outguess God. Some thought He spent too much effort reclaiming people they didn’t consider worth the effort. They thought a man’s prayer would be heard on the basis of its structure and polish. They were sure that the banquet table in God’s glory would be surrounded by people of substance and standing. Jesus refuted each misconception with a story, often leaving the Parisaic doctors of the law fuming in frustration.

This story has a different audience, though. Yes, the proud Pharisees come off no better than in other parables, but the hearers in this parable were Jesus’ own twelve apostles. They, too, had been trying to guess what Jesus thought about certain things. The fact that they missed it by a mile should be a caution for us to consider carefully what God *says* rather than what *we think He should or would say*.

1. What was the occasion for this parable? (Read Matthew 19:16-26) What question did this raise in Peter’s mind? (Read 19:27)

2. What did Jesus promise his faithful apostles would receive? (v. 28) What about others who sacrificed their possessions and approval of loved ones? (v. 29)

3. Until verse 29 in the passage, it could probably be said that Jesus' promises of rewards pretty well fit man's expectations (i.e., you work hard and sacrifice, you are rewarded. Said another way, you get what you earn.) Verse 30, however, introduces something unexpected with the little word "*but*." How does the content of verse 30 (repeated in 20:16) which talks about the possibility of some startling changes in the order of things, introduce a new thought?

4. Read the parable in verses 1-16. Whom does the landowner represent? Who are the laborers? What does the vineyard represent?

5. The first laborers hired in the early morning agreed to work for a denarius (a day's wage for a soldier or laborer). The landowner agreed to pay those who were hired the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours "*whatever is right* . . ." (See verse 4. See also verses 5, 6, and 7) What would human expectation dictate the wages to be for these hired later? Is there anything wrong with this expectation?

6. Notice that there was no set agreement or contract with those who were hired later as there was with those hired in the early hours. Why do you suppose these "late hires" were willing to go to work without a set contract?

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7. Describe what those hired in the eleventh hour (6 PM, very near quitting time) must have expected for pay.

8. Note carefully the special instructions given by the landowner to his foreman as to the *order* in which the men were to be given their paychecks. (Verse 8). It seems intentionally backward. Why do you suppose the landowner did it this way?

9. Describe what might have been the looks on the eleventh hour workers' faces as they received a day's pay for a few hours' work. Why do you suppose the landowner decide to pay them so generously? What does this teach us about God?

10. The workers who had "*borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day,*" (v. 12), "*thought that they would receive more,*" (v. 10), than the denarius they had agreed to. Describe their line of reasoning. Why did they grumble when they received what they had agreed to? Would *you* have grumbled under similar circumstances?

11. The following story was told by Thomas Thurman:

I once worked in a factory, side by side with two fellows whose attitude toward their work shouted the "What's-in-it-for-me?" philosophy. I remember one night when our relief man failed to come to work. This put an extra burden on our foreman and everyone else. Our foreman went rushing around trying to find a means of giving every worker a proper relief time, but he was having a great deal of trouble doing so. The two fellows I mentioned, being disgruntled, decided to take matters into their own hands. They simply stopped working, and went off on a break! As a consequence, the entire assembly line had to shut down, and everyone stood around until they decided to return to their work. Obviously, they weren't concerned about others, just what was "in it" for them.

Is there any similarity between the attitudes of these two men and those who grumbled in the parable? Explain.

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12. Did the landowner do anything unjust in paying the late-hires generously? (See verse 15a). Did he do anything unjust in paying those hired early what they had agreed to? Yet, you can just imagine the words “It’s not fair!” being heard among their grumbles. What was their *real* problem? (See verse 15b).

13. What are some ways in which the attitude of the “early hires” shows up in the church? (Hint: Consider those who have “grown up” in the church. Consider those who have worked hard to earn trust and places of influence.) Obviously, God does not think like we do. We must learn to think the way He does.

14. What should be your attitude toward God and His people if you are a “late hire” in the kingdom?

One writer summed up the lesson(s) of this passage this way: “In response to Peter’s question about rewards, the message was rather clear. Give less attention to the rewards for service, and more to the joy of serving. Be less confident in your present standing among your colleagues, and more trustful of God’s grace to deal with every person more generously than he or she deserves.”