

# The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

## (Matthew 20:1-16)

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[Scripture quotations taken from the NASB](#)

In Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus gave the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. As the parable begins, a landowner goes out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them each a denarius and sent them into his vineyard to work. (A denarius was the usual wage at the time for one day's service of a laborer or a soldier.)

At about nine in the morning, the landowner went out again and found others standing around idle in the marketplace. He told these individuals also to go and work in his vineyard, and he said that he would pay them whatever was right. These also went to his vineyard to work.

The landowner then went out again at about noon and then again at around three in the afternoon, and he hired even more workers for his vineyard. He went out yet again at about five in the afternoon and found others standing around, and he asked them why they had been standing idle all day. They replied, saying that no one had hired them. He told these individuals also to go and work in his vineyard.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard told his foreman to call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on to the first. The workers who were hired last, at five in the afternoon or the eleventh hour of the day, each received a denarius. When those who were hired first came to be paid, they expected to be paid more, but each of them also received

a denarius. When they received it, they complained against the landowner, saying that he had made those who worked only one hour equal to them, when they were the ones who had born the heat and burden of the day.

Jesus replied to them beginning in verse thirteen where we read: "... 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' So the last shall be first, and the first last." (Matthew 20:13-16)

This parable is an example of a Scriptural teaching that can have meaning on different levels. It is fine to interpret scriptural teachings on different levels, so long as our interpretation is not contradicted by any other teachings in the Bible.

On one level, some interpreters see the laborers hired first as symbolic of the Jews, who were angered to think that the Gentiles would be made equal to them (Matthew 20:12) by being included in God's salvation. We can see a parallel teaching with a very similar message that Jesus gave to us in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), where the older son (symbolic of the Jews) was angered at the forgiveness that his father extended to the younger son (symbolic of the Gentiles).

On another level, we can interpret the market place in this parable as the world, and we can interpret the "hiring" or appointing of certain individuals in the market place to go and work in the landowner's vineyard as symbolic of the effectual calling of God of an individual to faith in Christ. There can be no fruitful labor in the kingdom of God by those who are not believers. And again, we can see that Jesus gave us a parallel teaching with a very similar message in John 15:1-8, with His teaching about a vine and its branches. He taught that unless the branch (symbolic of men) abides in union the vine (symbolic of Jesus Himself), it can bear no fruit.

Interpreting the parable along these lines, we can also see that the calling of an individual to faith in Christ can occur at any time in their life, even very late in life, at the "eleventh hour" (Matthew 20:6). God calls individuals to faith in His Son in His time and according to His plan and purpose for their lives. And the fruits of their labors may well be rewarded the same as for those of us who have been laboring in God's "vineyard" for much longer.