

Grace Among the Grapes

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 July 2013

Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0:00] Let's go ahead and start tonight with a question.

! How many of you actually like to finish last when you're doing something? I figured there wouldn't be too many that wanted to finish last because nearly everybody wants to win. And finishing last is counter to our culture. And the desire to finish ahead of someone is not unique to us. It was true of ancient Israel in Jesus' day as well.

It's likely true of every society. And that's what makes the saying of Jesus so interesting. And we're going to find that saying on every end of the passage that we study tonight. Matthew 19.30 says, but many who are first will be last, and the last first. And then Matthew 20.16a reverses the two clauses. It says, so the last will be first, and the first last.

Between those statements, Jesus uses a parable to explain what he means about that. And without even looking at that parable, let's think about how the last could be first, and the first could be last. There are at least two possible scenarios there. One explanation could be that only one person is being considered. So if Tom was the only person running in a race, he'd be both the first and the last person in that race. And the second possible explanation then, is that all participants finish in a tie. And that's the explanation that fits the parable that we're going to look at tonight. Typically a tie is unexciting, but this tie is a tie that we're going to like. And I think you'll see that as we go through the passage tonight. So we've already touched on the saying a little bit. We'll look at four more things as we consider the passage itself. We're going to look at the setting, the story, the symbolism, and the significance.

So let's go ahead and look at the setting, or the context for the parable. We're not going to spend too much time on the episodes before the parable, but the two episodes before it actually help explain why Jesus told the parable. And Matthew 19, 16 through 26 have the story of the rich young ruler. So let's acquaint ourselves with that. Matthew 19, 16 says, Now behold, one came and said to him, Good teacher, what thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? And then skipping down to verses 21 through 26 of chapter 19, we see this. It says, Jesus said to him, If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. When his disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, Who then can be saved? That Jesus looked at them and said to them, With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. And as usual, Peter felt compelled to make a comment to that.

[3:38] And Peter's question and Jesus' answer formed the second section before tonight's passage. So look at Peter's words in 19.27. It says, Then Peter answered and said to him, See, we have left all and followed you. Therefore, what shall we have?

Jesus' answer then in the next three verses sets up the parable of the workers in the vineyard. And those verses say, So Jesus said to them, Assuredly, I say to you that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my namesake, shall receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. So now we come to the parable itself. And the parable centers around a single workday. And the Jewish workday began at 6 a.m. and went to 6 p.m. So you've got a 12-hour workday there. And we'll see references to the third hour. And the third hour then is 9 a.m., three hours after the beginning of the workday. So that's 9 a.m. for the third hour. What would that make the sixth hour then?

Yeah, the sixth hour is noon. The ninth hour then is 3 p.m. And the eleventh hour is 5 p.m., just one day or one hour before the workday is over. So let's go ahead and read the passage then all together, and then we'll look at it again as we go through the verses. Starting with verse 1 of chapter 20 it says, For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace and said to them, You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.

So they went. Again he went out about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle and said to them, Why have you been standing here idle all day? They said to him, Because no one hired us.

He said to them, You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive. So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first. And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more, and they likewise each received a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner saying, These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who abhorred the burden and the heat of the day. But he answered one of them and said, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take one as yours, and go your way. 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 my own things?

[7:07] Or is your eye evil? Because I am good. So the last will be first, and the first last. To really understand those verses, we need to put ourselves in the culture of that day.

So look back at Matthew 20, verse 1. It says, For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. So this was a normal situation for that time period. A landowner would have some permanent paid workers, but he wouldn't have enough of his own workers to quickly bring in the harvest. The owner would have to hire day laborers then to help bring in the crop. And the day laborers were the lowest of Israel's labor force.

They simply had to hope that somebody would hire them for the day. And if they couldn't find work for that day, the laborers and their families might not be able to eat that day. So look at verse 2. It tells us how much the landowner agreed to pay the first laborers he hired. It says, Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. The denarius is a silver coin that's the value of a day's wage for a Roman soldier. And the denarius also is a typical wage for a full-time servant. So the agreed upon payment was more than the day laborer would have expected. You can see from the story that the laborers readily agreed to go in the vineyard and work. And then look again at verses 3 through 7. They say, And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace and said to them, You also go into the vineyard and whatever is right I will give you.

So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle and said to them, Why have you been standing idle all day? They said to him, Because no one hired us. He said to them, You also go into the vineyard and whatever is right you will receive. So how much does the landowner agree to pay the workers that he hires throughout the day?

They never actually agree on an amount, do they? Verse 3 says, Whatever is right I will give you.

And then verse 7 says, Whatever is right you will receive. The workers hired later in the day were so desperate that they agreed to work without even knowing what they were going to be paid.

[9:39] And that goes back to what we discussed earlier. The day laborers who didn't find work likely would like money to buy food so they wanted to get any money they could get. If you look at verse 8 it says then, So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, Call the laborers and give them their wages beginning with the last, or beginning with the last to the first.

So let's pause here for a second and think about the situation. Because this verse shows that Jesus was careful to follow the Old Testament law even when telling a parable. The law actually required that day laborers be paid at the end of every day. And Leviticus 19.13 and Deuteronomy 24, 14 and 15 make this point very clear. Because Leviticus 19.13 says, You shall not cheat your neighbor nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning. And then Deuteronomy 24, 14 and 15 expand on that a little bit. They say, You shall not oppress a hired

servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and he has set his heart on it, lest he cry out against you to the Lord and it be sin to you. So you can see how important it was then for the laborers to be paid every day. It was so important that God even wrote it into the law to make sure that that happened. So now let's look at what they were paid.

Here's verse 9 of Matthew 20 again. It says, And when those came who were hired about the 11th hour, they each received a denarius. So let's consider that. Those last workers were hired about 5 p.m. and they only had one hour to work in the field. Yet they were paid a full denarius. We know that the first workers were watching. So can you imagine what they had to have been thinking whenever they saw the last workers get paid a full denarius? Well, the first workers obviously were thinking that they were going to get paid a lot more because after all, they'd been working since 6 a.m. And that meant that the first workers spent 12 times as long in the field as the last people who were hired. So check out verses 10 through 12 again.

Verse 10 confirms that the first workers did expect to get more, but they were in for quite a surprise. It says, But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more.

[12 : 15] And they likewise each received a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner saying, These last men have worked only one hour and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day. So how did the first workers describe the conditions that they worked under? They said it was hot and hard work and they were really busy. And they were really laying it on pretty thick there because the word they used for heat is actually the word for burner. And it's the same word that's often used to describe the scorching east wind that comes along in that part of the country and actually can crack the skin and crack the lips. And when that hot east wind blows, it really is brutal for the people that are out there. And it may really have been that hot, but the workers were also trying to make a point. They wanted to make the point that relative to the other workers, they felt like they deserved more. So can you relate to the first group of people thinking that they would get paid more than the others? Is there anything inherently wrong with feeling like you should get paid more if you work longer than somebody else? That's human nature and that in itself is not bad because expecting to be paid based upon the level of work performed is normal. But as we look at the landowner's reply in more depth, we're going to see what's wrong with the first group's response. So let's break the landowner's reply into sections at each end with a question. Here's verse 13. It says, but he answered one of them and said, friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? So is the landowner correct there with his question? Yes, he is correct. We saw back in verse 2 that the landowner agreed to pay the first workers a denarius. And remember what we discussed earlier, the denarius was equal to what roman soldiers and long-term servants were paid for a day's work. The first group of laborers then was going to be paid pretty well and they had no problem with that wage when the landowner proposed it.

So then let's read on to see more of the landowner's response and look at the next question. So here are verses 14 and 15a. It says, take what is yours and go your way. 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 my own things? So what's the correct answer to, is it not lawful for me to wish or to do what I wish with my own things?

It's his. Yep. The landowner did have the right to do that. And why do you think the landowner wanted to give the same amount to the last people? He was generous, right? And he did it simply because he wanted to.

So I'm going to say, at least, the pirates didn't have to go back to town three or four times and hire more and hire more. That's exactly right. That's a good point. You didn't have to go back those times and hire everybody.

So now look at the landowner's last question at the end of verse 15. It says, or is your eye evil? Because I am good. And the evil eye reference actually comes from other parts of scripture. It gets mentioned in Deuteronomy and in Proverbs as well. And it's a Hebrew expression that refers to envy and jealousy.

[15 : 53] So think about this a little more. Had the first workers been cheated out of anything? So why then do you think they were jealous of the last workers if they hadn't been cheated out?

Carter and I think the other ones deserve it. Perfect. Exactly. They felt like the others didn't deserve the same thing. We talked about how this comes from a term that talks about jealousy. And we can

have at least two types of jealousy.

One type of jealousy is wanting what someone else has. And another type of jealousy is begrudging someone for having something, regardless of whether you want it or not. And that second type of jealousy is what comes into play here.

All the workers had the denarius. So it wasn't that the first group was begrudging another group from having what they didn't have. They had the same thing. They just didn't want that other group to have the same thing as they did.

So now that we've looked at the saying, the setting, and the story, let's look at the symbolism.

Nearly every character or item in the parable is symbolic of something else.

[17 : 05] So here's where we get into filling in some of your blanks again. The vineyard represents the kingdom of God. So once again, the vineyard represents the kingdom of God.

And if the vineyard represents the kingdom, who do you think the landowner represents? Actually, the landowner represents God there.

Whom do the workers represent? You're right. The workers represent us. The people that God calls into his kingdom. So here's where it gets a little bit tougher. What do you think the work day represents?

Not quite. The work day actually represents each person's lifetime. So each person's lifetime is what's represented by the work day.

And for those that are called into the kingdom, some are called early in life. Some are called in the middle of their life. Some are called after they get even older than that. And then a few are called at the very end of their life.

[18 : 16] And the people called at the very end of their life are the ones that are represented by those whom the landowner hired at the 11th hour. So whom do you think the landowner steward represents?

Yep, I've heard it mentioned out there. Landowner steward does represent Jesus. And think about that.

Jesus paid the wages necessary for us to enter into the kingdom. And in the parable, he's paying the wages to the workers in the kingdom. So here's a little bit tougher one again.

What do you think the denarius represents? The denarius actually represents eternal life. It's what we get from Jesus.

So eternal life is what goes into your blanks there. The last time I filled in on a Wednesday, we looked at John 3.16 in quite a bit of detail. And of course that verse says, For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

[19 : 26] And the parable in Matthew 20 illustrates that verse. What does God promise in John 3.16? Yep, eternal life is what we're promised there.

And does John 3.16 say anything about how young or old a person must be to obtain eternal life? It just says you have to believe, and if you believe, you get eternal life.

So let's spend our remaining time then looking at the significance of the parable. Because in addition to illustrating John 3.16, the parable reminds us of several more biblical truths.

There are quite a few Bible verses there, and in case you don't want to flip to all of those, I've listed every one that I'm going to mention in your handout, so you can check up on them later if you want to.

The first point, under significance, is that God sovereignly chooses who will be saved. So once again, God sovereignly chooses who will be saved.

[20 : 27] In John 6.44, Jesus said, No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. And we saw that illustrated in the parable, because the landowner went into the marketplace, and he found the workers for his vineyard, and he brought them into his vineyard.

The second thing that we can see from the parable, though, is that God accepts all who are willing to come to him. So once again, that's God accepts all who are willing to come to him.

We've already looked at John 3.16, where we saw that whoever believes will have everlasting life. And we just looked at John 6.44 under the first point, but a few verses before that, that's where Jesus said this in John 6.37.

He said, All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will by no means cast out. And then in John 6.40, we see Jesus say this.

He says, And this is the will of him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have everlasting life, and I will raise him up at the last day. Sometimes we can get caught up in worrying about how the first two points can both be true at the same time, but we know they're true because the Bible teaches both.

[21 : 46] And suffice it to say, for this study, that we can be confident that God has it all figured out, and we can just let him reconcile any of the confusion there. And we also see the second point illustrated in the parable, because the landowner gave a denarius, which, remember, represents everlasting life, to every worker who came to the field.

And that brings us to the third point of significance there, and that is that God is still busy saving people. So God is still busy saving people.

And he's going to continue to save people right up to the end of this age. And we hear Jesus teach that truth a little bit further back in Matthew. If we look at Matthew 24, verse 14, that's where Jesus said, And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

So listen to that verse one more time. It says, So tonight's parable illustrates this point by showing people saved at nearly all hours of the workday.

And of course, we know the workday represents each person's life, so it's showing people saved at all different stages of their lives. That should be a really positive truth for us, because that should give us hope.

[23 : 15] We should never give up hope for somebody being saved. Because that person may be someone who God will choose to save at the eleventh hour of their life. And the fourth truth that we see from this parable, or the fourth item of significance, is that God always gives us what he promises.

So promises is what fits in your blank there. And one cross-reference for that is in Titus 1-2. And that's where Paul writes to Titus, In hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began.

And in the parable, we've already highlighted how the landowner fulfilled his promises to every group. And the fifth item of significance we have there is that God gives us more than we deserve. So God gives us more than we deserve, is number five. We're going to look at a couple of verses in Romans to see that. And there are verses that are going to be very familiar to you.

Romans 3-23 tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And then three chapters later, in 6-23, we see this. Romans 6-23 says, For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[24 : 38] So what do we deserve as sinners? That's right, we deserve death because of our sin. But what do believers get instead? Eternal life.

And so, once again, we see how that's a clear example of how God gives us more than we deserve. And we see this principle several places in the parable tonight.

Even the workers who worked the full day got more than they deserve. Because we already talked about how those laborers were paid wages that were equal to a Roman soldier or a full-time servant. They didn't get a typical day laborer rate.

And then, of course, everybody else who came along also got more than they deserved because they got a full denarius too. And obviously, those wages were paid by the steward, which we talked about representing Christ, who also paid the wages of sin for us.

Then number six on the significance is that God blesses us for His good pleasure. God blesses us for His good pleasure. And we're going to go to Ephesians 1, 5, and 6 for that.

[25 : 46] And they say that God predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

So let's think about how we see that principle at work in the parable. Do you think that the workers hired at the 11th hour added much value for the landowner?

Teresa had already mentioned it before. He really didn't have a need to keep going back and getting more workers. With only one hour left in the workday, especially that last group hired, really wasn't going to accomplish too much more than what had already been done.

But the landowner had compassion on them and hired them anyway because he saw that they had a great need. And that demonstrates the merciful nature of the landowner, who, of course, is God. Then the last item of significance we have is that God gives us every spiritual blessing. God gives us every spiritual blessing.

[26 : 50] Also in Ephesians chapter 1, we see this in verse 3. It says, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

So if God has given us every spiritual blessing, what are we missing? And let's personalize it a little bit.

If God has given me every spiritual blessing, should I be concerned or be jealous that he's given you every spiritual blessing as well? That's why it really doesn't matter when people come to salvation.

It doesn't matter that they all get the same thing because God gives us all every spiritual blessing. And also think about this, too.

We know that all of the redeemed have eternal life, and it's really hard to be envious of somebody else who has eternal life if you have eternal life as well. So we listed seven items of significance, but they all fall under the same general category because they're all evidence of God's grace.

[27 : 57] It really could have been just one point with seven sub-points because they all are evidence of God's grace. So let's consider the proper response to that grace, then, to wrap things up.

One of the things we should keep in mind is that we should be thankful to God for saving us. So we should be thankful to God for saving us. The Apostle Paul is perhaps our best example of how to be thankful.

And in Colossians 1, 12 through 14, he says that he is giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

And the second thing under the proper response category is that we should be willing to work in the vineyard. So willing to work is what goes into your blanks there.

So think about the workers illustrated in our parable tonight. Every worker that the landowner hired worked. Some worked for only about an hour, and some worked for 12 hours, but they all worked for whatever time they had left.

[29 : 16] And Ephesians 5, 15 says this. It says, See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

And the phrase, redeeming the time, in that verse, which is what goes into your blank there, likely refers to one's lifetime as a believer. So redeeming the time, then, likely refers to one's lifetime as a believer.

And the message there is that we're to make the most of our time on this evil earth in fulfilling God's purposes, and we should line up every opportunity for useful worship and service.

And then finally, Teresa mentioned this earlier, too. The last thing under our proper response is that we should rejoice when God saves and blesses others.

So we should rejoice when God saves and blesses others. Psalm 68, 19 says this. It says, Blessed be the Lord who daily loads us with benefits, the God of our salvation.

[30 : 21] So notice a few things about that verse. How often does it say we get loaded with benefits? Daily. It says daily in there.

And also notice the plural pronouns in that verse. It doesn't say the Lord loads me with benefits, or the Lord loads you with benefits. It says he loads us with benefits.

And it says he's the God of our salvation, not just my salvation or your salvation, but our salvation. So we started this lesson with the question, and we said, How many like to finish last?

And we also talked about the saying in Matthew 19, 30, and then Matthew 20, 16. And remember, of course, as Matthew 20, 16 words it, So the last will be first, and the first last.

So from an earthly perspective, then, none of us should be thrilled to finish in a tie. But from God's eternal perspective, all of us should be thrilled, because only God has the infinite resources to bless all his children equally.

[31 : 25] And just like the workers in the vineyard who helped us see God's grace among the grapes, we are recipients of God's infinite grace as well. And that's why we also can say, Blessed be the Lord who daily loves us with benefits, the God of our salvation.

Thank you.