

PARABLES | The Workers in the Vineyard

Rob Rogers February 12, 2023

Introduction

Just because you feel something is true, doesn't mean that it is. Just because you feel that you've been treated unfairly or unjustly, *might* indicate that you have been treated unfairly, but it doesn't necessarily *mean* that you have been.

Just because you perceive something as truth, doesn't mean that it is.

PERSONAL: Every now and then, I'll take one of my kids to the corner store near our house and let them pick out a treat... an ice-cream sandwich or a soft drink... just something really bad for them. They'll be so happy, so excited — inevitably they'll realize that they can come home and brag to their sibling about what they have, and what the other one doesn't. So I'll prep them, "You don't have to hide it... but don't go bragging about it... don't rub their face in it!" They don't care — they'll do it anyway. No respect. And the other sibling will see it and look up at me, "*How could you!? How could you do this to me?*" Internally their feelings are screaming, "*This is unfair! This is unjust! There is no equity or sense of justice in this family! I'm going on strike!*"

And I'm thinking, "Do you not remember that I just took you to get ice cream yesterday! It's not like it was two years ago! It's literally one day ago, and once I remind them of what is true, they sort of calm down, "*Fine, whatever Dad, that may be true, but don't expect me to like it!*"

Feelings are incredibly important. They are gift from God. But they don't always indicate truth or reality.

Today in Matthew 20, we're going to look at a parable where this is the case with some laborers in a vineyard. On the surface, they feel like they are being cheated.

The workers in the vineyard

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² **After agreeing** with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ **So the last will be first, and the first last.**"

The irony of this story is that it's not actually about someone being cheated. This parable exposes our own hypocrisy and double standards.

ILLUSTRATION: How many of you have ever been stuck in that bumper-to-bumper traffic in Spring Hill on 31? Or rush hour on 65? How many of you have ever been cut off by some law-breaking heathen during that bumper-to-bumper traffic? Or someone who is speeding on the shoulder skipping past all the law-abiding Christians patiently waiting their turn, while they're praying "God's richest blessings" on everyone else stuck in traffic that day?

Does anyone else talk to the people in the other cars while they're stuck in traffic? Like somehow they can hear you? I'll do this, and my kids will look at me like I'm crazy, "Dad, you do know they can't hear you right?" "No, it's okay kids... daddy's just praying..."

But when somebody cuts us off — not that I know this from experience, but, hypothetically, I could imagine — there would be something visceral, something primal, some righteous indignation that would rise up in us and demand JUSTICE upon that person.

But again, hypothetically, if I'm the one speeding on the shoulder — if I'm the one who, of course totally by accident, cuts someone else off in traffic — somehow my standard of justice completely evaporates. All of a sudden, I'm an expert on grace and mercy. I can recite all the verses... verses I didn't even know that I knew will come to mind.

***All of us want justice on others, but grace and mercy for ourselves.
This parable exposes our double standard.***

Justice for others — grace and mercy for ourselves

The story is not about someone being cheated out of anything, even though it sure does feel like it. It's not about someone being short changed — ***it's about someone else being blessed.***

It's not about the stinginess of the master — ***it's about his unmerited generosity.***

And the question for us today is, how do you respond when someone, who as far as you can tell, hasn't put in the time, effort, blood, sweat and tears that you have... receives the same wage as you. How do you respond when someone else receives more than what YOU think they deserve?

The workers in the field came at different times of the day:

- Workers @ early morning – 7am
- Workers @ the 3rd Hour – 9am
- Workers @ the 6th Hour – 12pm
- Workers @ the 9th Hour – 3pm
- Workers @ the 11th Hour – 5pm

Reckoning, or payment comes at 6pm, starting with the last hired — who have only worked for one hour.

If you were the worker who'd been working ALL day, in comparison with the workers who only worked one hour, even though you agreed to the wage you'd receive before you did an ounce of work — you wouldn't be able to help but feel cheated — but why?

Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? That is a day's wage. That's what you agreed to. That's what you signed up for. So why would you feel cheated?

Comparison is the thief of joy

Here's Jesus' point...

*You would only feel cheated **in COMPARISON** to the other workers.*

How many of us, feel some level of contentment and joy about our lives, our life choices — until we jump on Instagram or Facebook, and we see our friends from high school, or someone else in our career field, that is seemingly excelling at a much faster pace than we are. And in a second, we are robbed of our joy.

It's the idea, *"I thought I was pretty happy with my life before I saw yours."* The temptation for us, especially in our culture, is to *constantly compare our lowest moments with someone else's highlight reel.* We begin to lose any semblance of gratitude, contentment, and joy. They are replaced with complaining, grumbling, depressions, and discontentment.

This is a pandemic... and people in vocational ministry are not immune to this. I heard one pastor literally cursing another pastor because they have a bigger church, a bigger platform, seemingly making a bigger impact than they are — and from their point of view, have not put in the time, effort, and sacrifice that they have. To curse another kingdom laborer, because you perceive that they're making a bigger impact than you — you can't get much more worldly than that.

There are few things more poisonous to the soul than comparison.

What you look for is what you end up seeing

The more you compare your life and circumstance with others the easier it becomes — the more ingrained into your habits it becomes. One day you wake up and realize, "I've become a wildly miserable person because all I do I think about what other people have that I only wish I had — what other people do that I only wish I could do — because God isn't blessing me like He's blessing them.

The sole focus of your life has become rooted in comparison with others — rather than on the undeserved, unmerited blessing of a relationship with God over your own life!

*It's only when your focus is on Jesus that you can look at the low points in your life and say, "Not, why is this happening to me?" But instead in those moments keeping your eyes on Jesus and knowing, "**God is preparing me! God is growing me!** He's getting me ready for something! He's changing me! God willing, I will be far more like Him as a result of the low points, hardships, and difficulties I have to endure!"*

Clinging to the reality that God is building something in me far greater, brighter, weightier, and more impactful than I could ever imagine. He's so faithful, kind, gracious, and generous to **me** — *regardless of whatever he is or is not doing with those people.*

But what about him...?

Pastor Dave Buehring and I were talking about this passage the other day, and it reminded him of this moment with Peter and Jesus in John 21.

John 21:18-22

"I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go." ¹⁹Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow Me."

²⁰Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, "Lord, who will betray you?" ²¹Peter asked Jesus, "What about him, Lord?"

²²Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, **what is that to you?** **As for you, follow me.**"

This is where the rumor began that John wouldn't ever die.

Jesus tells Peter what he is going to suffer, and Peter immediately says, "*What about him? I knew it! This proves it! You DO love John more than me!*" His first response is to compare — to figure out if their suffering is going to be equitable.

Then Jesus says, "*What I do or do not do with John is none of your business. Maybe He'll live forever, maybe he'll die tomorrow... but that's MY concern, not yours! As for you... what's your job again — Follow Me!*"

**If your focus is on the unfairness of life compared to other people,
you are completely distracted from the very thing
that God has gifted and called YOU to do.**

It's not your business what God is doing with your neighbor, coworkers, boss, or your friends from high school. When you're focused on what others have that you don't have, and think life's not fair, you are in that very moment, making yourself blind to the reality of the goodness of God. You can't see Him for who He is.

If you focus instead on FOLLOWING Jesus, only then will you be able to recognize and be grateful that God is a God who has kept His promises to YOU, and He is always faithful to YOU, always good, always generous to YOU

Jesus is **not** giving us this parable so that we cannot adopt the landowner's methods in our 21st century American business practices.

*The point of the parable is **not** even about the workers.*

It's **not** about the workers, and it's **not** about the vineyard.

It's **not** about how you should treat employees; it's not talking about fair wages.

The point of the parable is **not** about anyone being cheated out of anything.

The point of the passage is about the generosity of the master of the house.

The generosity of the master of the house

Every Parable carries with it a Kingdom reality — so what is the Kingdom reality in this parable?

Matthew 20:1

“For the kingdom of heaven is like... **a master of a house**

What did the master of the house do?

The Master of the House went out hired people at all different times throughout the day, and paid them all the same wage.

Does that seem fair? Absolutely not.

Do you realize that the only people that was treated fairly in this entire passage were the ones who worked all day for the agreed-upon wage?

Everyone else was treated absolutely unfairly — **for their benefit.**

This parable is the story of a God who keeps going back to find people to bring with Him into His vineyard,

He goes and finds people in 7am, then at 9am, then by noon... nobody else wants these people... but He does, and He gives them a place and He gives them purpose. And at 3pm and even at 5pm — these are the workers that nobody wants.

But THIS master of the house, THIS landowner, THIS God goes out to find the ones that nobody else wants — and gives them what they do not deserve. He gives them what is absolutely unfair, and unjust, *but it's only unfair because of how extravagantly generous He is being to them.*

“You might have been looked over and left behind — but THIS God says, “No, I choose you, I have a place for you, I have work for you, I have a purpose for you, and I’m going to treat you so unfairly it’s going to blow your mind. If anyone else that has a problem with it, don’t worry about them, I’ll deal with them however I see fit. Just keep your eyes on Me and I’m going to give you everything. *I’m going to give you everything I’ve prepared for you and so much more than you could ever earn or deserve.*”

This story is about is about a gift that you’ve been given by an extravagantly generous God in heaven, who kept seeking out the ones that no one else wanted. The brokenhearted, the beaten-down, the overlooked, the forgotten, the outcast, the neglected.

This story tells us that life is not fair — and thank GOD it's not — because if we all got what we really deserved there wouldn't be a single one of us left standing.

- When we deserved justice, *God gave us mercy.*
- When we deserved dismissal and rejection, *He chose us and welcomed us in.*

Life is not fair, aren't you glad about it?

He pursued you and me, He sought you and me, He came down to invite us into His vineyard... to give a place to belong, a purpose in life, and a Home in heaven where we will be with Him for all of eternity. It is a gift that we could not earn, and do not deserve, thank God — Life's not fair.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever perceived something to be true, but later to find out that it is not true?
2. Discuss: Feelings are important, a gift from God — but they don't always indicate truth or reality.
3. How does this parable expose our own hypocrisy and double standards?
4. How do you respond when someone else receives more than what you think they deserve?
5. Discuss: "Comparison is the thief of joy."
6. How is the point of the parable about the generosity of the master of the house?
7. Is the Master of your House generous and merciful to you? What is your reaction?

NOTES