

September 20, 2020 Sermon  
Matthew 20:1-16

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ they said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last, and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.’”* We give thanks for the Word of God!

At first glance, and maybe even second glance, this parable seems a bit confusing. We are used to getting paid for the amount of time that is put into something. If you work for *eight* hours, then you get *paid* for eight hours. If you only work for *one* hour, then you get the amount for *one* hour. Jesus has a different perspective of what is right. We tend to see things through the lens of *society*, rather than the lens of *God*.

The landowner went into town at all different times of day. I find it fascinating that he would *do* that, knowing that maybe he should be overseeing things back at the vineyard with the people he hired first, even though he has a manger, but here is a person who seems to have his mind set on offering work to people. I find that to be very noble.

He starts out early in the morning, then back about nine o'clock, then noon, three o'clock and finally five o'clock.

When he went into town at five, he seemed to be surprised that there were still workers left, waiting for something to do, and he says to them, "Why are you standing here *idle* all day?" The response was, "Because no one would *hire* us." Notice we didn't hear them say, "We'd rather just hang out together. Who needs to work, anyway?"

Why wouldn't someone *hire* them? Were they too *young*? Maybe too *old*? Maybe they were the *weak* or *elderly*; possibly *disabled* or perhaps they were ex-convicts; people who were considered *untrustworthy*.

They were like those kids who don't get picked for a team when choosing up sides because the captains think they can't bat, or kick or run. (But I digress)

These were people *willing* to *work*, but for some reason the rest of the world had cast them aside, so the landowner gives them work, and at the end of the day when the workers line up for their daily wages, the manager is told to start with the workers that had been hired *last*. I would imagine they were *ecstatic* to get the amount of money they received.

As payment was being made to each worker, those who had worked the longest amount of hours began to think that they were most likely getting *more* because, of course, they had worked long and hard; *much* longer and *much* harder than those who came in at five o'clock. But that was *not* to be! Those who had been working the entire day wound up getting the same as those who had been there only a *short* time.

This, of course, resulted in great amounts of grumbling to the landowner. "These last few people you hired worked *only* for an *hour*, and yet you made them *equal* to us! How does *that* happen? We've been out here in the field, in the hot sun toiling away for you the ENTIRE DAY. WE should be getting more than those people you just brought in! *You* have treated us so unfairly!"

My dad had a way of paraphrasing scripture that caused certain verses to stick with me. When I would say to him that I felt *I* was being treated unfairly, he would loosely quote one of the Matthew verses about righteousness by saying to me, “God rains on the just and the unjust, just the same.”

As in, WE can’t tell God how other people should be treated. WE are equal in the eyes of God, and God’s *grace* is for *all*.

I received a phone call the morning I began working my way through the text for this sermon. It was a lady calling from a neighboring state. She had been told about the clothing ministry here at St. James (yes, it’s that well-known), and informed me that she had fifty pairs of shoes from her late husband. He had wanted them to be donated to people in Appalachia.

First of all, that’s a lot of shoes. Secondly, I was amazed that she was adamant about bringing them *here* because the name “Appalachia” was in the title of our clothing ministry. Appalachia covers a lot of area. The *only* drawback for her was that she wasn’t able to drive at any distance, and she wasn’t too clear on how she had *heard* about us, so I made several suggestions to her for sharing her shoe bounty.

I first suggested that she offer them to several places like Goodwill or the Salvation Army, and those suggestions were met with excuses as to why she wouldn’t take them there. I then suggested that she find out the name of the organization that collects shoes to send to those in need in Haiti.

The response was “I don’t *want* them to go to THOSE people.” When her response was met with dead silence on my end, she continued with, “My late husband wanted to be able to help people in *our* area.” Well that’s all well and good, and maybe I understand that, but I couldn’t let it go and so I said, “It shouldn’t matter who **gets** the shoes as long as they *go* to someone who is *in dire need* of shoes.”

The major thought going through my head is that our clothing ministry actually sends excess clothing and shoes to the people of Haiti. We have a trailer that gets traded out for another trailer every few months filled with items for the Haitians.

Maybe I should have relayed that to the caller. At any rate, I apologized for *not* being able to help her, and suggested she call some Lutheran churches in HER area and they would most likely be able to take her shoe donation.

Following the phone call, my mind wandered around a bit. Mostly, my mind wandered to the thought of God's wonderful gift of grace to us. Aren't we fortunate, that God doesn't say to us, "Oh, I'm so sorry, were you in need of my grace today? I've decided not to give it to YOU, but rather to someone that I deem is more worthy...maybe someone closer to home...you know...someone who loves me a little bit more than YOU. Someone who works super hard at getting my attention on a day to day basis. Honestly, my grace shouldn't just be handed out willy-nilly, simply because *you've* shown up at the last minute in need of some grace.

Quite honestly, NONE of us are worthy of God's grace, and yet we are all *recipients* of his grace and mercy each and every day! "These last laborers worked only *one* hour, and you have made them EQUAL to us who have borne the burden of the day." Working in the real-world causes division. There is a sense of competition in who has the most money, the best car, the most land, the biggest house. WE have divided ourselves up into categories of winners and losers. We decide among ourselves who is *superior* and who is *inferior*. WE have become a people who judges the worth of people according to the job they have or whether or not they even *have* jobs.

It may behoove us to stop and give some thought as to why people aren't working, rather than making up our own minds about the situation. The landowner went into town about five o'clock and asked why there were still people standing idly by. He made *no* assumptions, but instead, *asked*. They said, "Because no one has hired us." Were they feeling inferior about that? Probably. Not one of them refused an offer to work. The landowner brought them a little dignity by hiring them to work in his vineyard, even if it was for a short time.

God in Christ, calls for a humility check with this gospel lesson, today. He takes everything and turns it completely around! All good things come from God, regardless of our ability to earn them. Our daily bread comes from God...whether that is seen as a lot, or a little, it is *enough*.

Those *we* see as being greatest in the world, whether it's because of their money or their power, are *not* seen the same in God's eyes. We do *not* have the same vision God has, and we need to work on that. Those who are seen as the lowliest are the ones who will be exalted by God.

We are *all* children of God, seen *equally* in the eyes of God, and we each receive equal shares of God's grace. The landowner in the parable gave everyone work, with the promise of pay. They all start out in the same situation, but they have forgotten by the end of the day how they each started out, and they have become envious of one another.

The landowner reminds them that he is not guilty of wrong-doing. He offered each of them a job with pay. "Take what belongs to you and go," says the landowner. "I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Shouldn't I be allowed to do as I choose?" God chose us. God lavishes his grace on us even when we don't ask for it or deserve it. This is a gift we should *all* be happy to receive. Be good to each other this week. Love one another, and share God's grace the way God loves and shares with us. Amen.