

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Matthew 20:1-16 Text: vs. 16 *“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

In our lesson this morning, Jesus told a parable about unfairness.

The Judean Hills surrounding the city of Jerusalem made it possible for grapes to grow in its high elevation. Cool breezes. Day and night temperature changes. Rich, well-drained soils. Grape growing was ideal for that area. He told how a vineyard owner went out early one morning to hire workers. All types of work had to be done in his vineyard. He could have been preparing a new vineyard. He could have been working on old vines in an existing vineyard. He could have been harvesting grapes. Whatever! But you can be assured it was hard work. Most vineyards were on terraced hillsides. The ground was very rocky. They had to prepare terraces for the vines by digging out stones for a retaining wall. That then had to be filled in with good soil carried up the slopes. What a job! In summer, the vines had to be pruned to increase production. Harvesting was done in September. The weather was hot. The rainy season hadn't begun.

And this vineyard owner didn't have enough workers to take care of such a large task. He often hired day laborers who worked one day at a time. No guarantee of work beyond that. When dawn came, workers gathered at the village marketplace hoping someone would hire them. The first laborers to arrive were hired and agreed to work for the normal daily wage. That would probably begin around 6 A.M. Then at nine o'clock, the owner of the vineyard passed through the marketplace again and saw some more people still standing around doing nothing. He hired them and told them he would pay them what was right at the end of the day. Noon came. The same thing. Then at three o'clock he did the same thing. Five o'clock he passed through the marketplace and hired some more workers. Then, he told his foreman to call the workers in at evening so he could pay them their wages. Those who had worked all day received the same pay as those who had only worked an hour and yet, received a full day's pay! That made those who had worked all day *very unhappy*. They said, *“Those people worked only one hour. And yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.”* That's not fair! Yes, you can sympathize with them. Then, the owner of the vineyard answered, *“I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take it and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be angry because I am kind?”*

Now, it's important for you to understand what Jesus was teaching through this parable. The vineyard represented the Kingdom of Heaven. The vineyard owner was God. The foreman was Jesus. The laborers were believers. And the day's pay was salvation. *Eternal life!* Remember, the pay was the same for all the workers. It didn't differ between those who had worked all day and the ones who had only worked one hour. And to understand this, remember, salvation is because of God's grace. God's grace is reliable. It never varies. Sometimes there are those who want to cry out, *unfair!* But sinners have no right to tell God who He should, or should not, extend His grace to. You can't cry *unfair* as the elder son did in the parable of the prodigal son. He did that because he *didn't* understand the grace of God. God's grace is offered to all, no matter how bad, or how good they have been. Or when they asked for it. That explains why the person who received Jesus as Savior at an early age, and the person who received Jesus on their deathbed, receive the *same Grace* from God. It's why the murderer and the good person can both go to heaven if they repent of their sins against God. God's grace is reliable. It's free to all who ask. Those vineyard laborers who had worked all day didn't understand this. They thought they should have received *more* than the people who worked only one hour. And if this really were a story about employees and employers, they would have been right to complain. They would have unionized!

The United Auto Workers (UAW) are on strike due to a breakdown in negotiations with the automotive companies, the “Detroit Three” - General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis which is a multinational automotive manufacturing corporation formed from the merger of the Italian American empire Fiat Chrysler Automobiles, and the French PSA Group headquartered in Amsterdam. The strike was declared when contract talks failed to secure new labor agreements before the current contracts expired. The UAW leader revealed a list of demands that included eliminating wage tiers. A 40% wage increase over the life of the contract. Restoring cost-of-living allowance adjustments to counteract inflation. A defined benefit pension for all workers. The right to strike over plant closures. A reduced work week. More paid time off. Limiting the use of temporary workers. And increased

benefits to current retirees. This strike is being called the “Stand Up Strike.” It may become one of the largest strikes in the industry’s history with the ripple effect to be felt everywhere as workers from at least three states join the picket line, including Donald Trump. And now Joe Biden.

But our lesson today is about God’s grace. The vineyard owner asked, *“Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money?”* God’s grace is extended freely and equally to all. For example, you go to the bank to take out a loan to buy a car. You don’t set the terms for your loan. The bank sets the terms. You only accept or reject them. You don’t tell the bank what interest rate you want. You accept what they give you. Or you go somewhere else. You might have the privilege of telling the bank how long you want the loan to be for. But that’s about it. In the same way, God sets the terms for salvation. *Not you!* In this parable, the landowner continued going back to the marketplace and hiring more workers. It’s a picture of God continually calling people to follow Him. And since God uses people to invite people to accept Jesus, it means there should never come a point when Christians stop inviting people to trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. God will always call people until the end of time. And why does God do that? Why does He continue to call people to follow Him? The Bible says, *“The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* (2 Peter 3:9)

Those day laborers were dependent on someone to hire them. They were needy. They were ready! They had no hope, other than someone hiring them. And having those needs, they accepted the work offered them. Gladly they looked to the landowner to help them meet their needs. And he didn’t disappoint them. Just as the landowner put everyone to work who wanted to work, so God saves all who desire to be saved. No one will be turned away! Anyone who wants a relationship with God can have it! Jesus said, *“Those the Father has given Me will come to Me, and I will never reject them.”* (John 6:37)

In the play *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, who was the first African American female author to have a play debut on Broadway in 1959. It was made into a film in 1961 starring Sidney Poitier. She told a story of a Black family's experiences in south Chicago attempting to improve their financial circumstances with an insurance payout following the death of the father. They received \$10,000 from the father’s insurance policy. The mother saw the money as a chance to escape the life of Black Americans living in Chicago under racial segregation. The daughter saw the money as a chance to live out her dream and go to medical school. The older brother begged for the money, so he and his friend could go into business together to make something of himself and eventually give it back to the family. Against her better judgment, the mother gave the money to her son. But life was never good for him. The money might have changed all that, but his *so-called friend* skipped town with the money to have the son return home and break the news to his family. His sister slammed into him. She called him every despicable thing of which she could think. When she took a breath, the mother interrupted and said, *“I thought I taught you to love him.”* The daughter answered, *“Love him? There’s nothing left to love.”* But listen to what the mother’s response to her was. Hear in her words a picture of God’s grace to us. . .

“There’s always something left to love. And if you haven’t learned that, you haven’t learned anything. Have you cried for that boy today? I don’t mean for yourself and the family because we lost all that money. I mean for him. For what he’s been through. And what it’s done to him. Honey, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they’ve done good and made things easy for everybody? Well, if you do, then you aren’t through learning, because that’s not the time at all. It’s when he’s at his lowest and he can’t believe in himself because the world has whipped him so hard. When you start measuring somebody, measure him right, child. Measure him right. Make sure you consider all the hills and valleys he’s come through before he got to where he is.”

. . . . And that, my friend, is what I want you to remember this morning. God has measured you. God knows where you are. All have sinned against Him. Many have lost what they *could* have had. But instead of God turning His back on them, He continually comes with the offer of salvation and forgiveness. You have to come to Him on His terms. And when you do, He will freely welcome you back into His arms. But then after you come to Him, He expects you to go out into His field and work! His harvest is ready for you to work in the vineyard that’s the Kingdom of Heaven. The landowner is God. The foreman is Jesus. You are His laborer. And you will receive *Eternal life!* It’s time to get to work for the Lord! Now, let’s do it! AMEN