

**Matthew 20:1-16**

**September 24, 2023**

What if those workers who were hired at six o'clock in the morning knew that the workers who would be hired at five o'clock that afternoon would be paid the exact same wage as they? Supposing they knew this early in the morning when they were hired, what would they have done? Wouldn't it have been easy for them to say: "No thanks. I'll wait to work in your vineyard until five o'clock today. Why should I work twelve hours when I can work just one hour for the same wage?" But they didn't know. And, in fact, it would not have been very smart for the master, when he hired them, to tell them what he was going to do at quitting time.

So, why does he tell us? You and I are the workers. The vineyard is the kingdom of heaven. Quitting time is when the work is all done. The end of time. The Last Day. And when that Day comes, every worker in God's kingdom, no matter how long they have worked, will receive the exact same wage. This is what Jesus teaches us in His parable. Maybe it wasn't very smart for Him to tell this to us now. Maybe He should have waited for quitting time to reveal this to us.

Because working in God's vineyard is hard work. Getting up to come to God's house Sunday after Sunday. Putting a percentage of our hard-earned income into the offering plate. Serving on boards and committees, and just plain helping out where our help is needed. Add to this the striving to obey God's Ten Commandments, and spending time each day in the Scriptures and in prayer.

Some of you have been doing these things pretty much your entire life. What a sacrifice! It's hard work! And yet, those of you who have been working hard in God's kingdom all your life in this way, will not be given more in the end, at quitting time, than those who are brought into the kingdom of heaven just weeks, or even days, before they die.

Like the thief on the cross. Talk about the eleventh hour! He repented and was brought into the kingdom of heaven mere hours before he died. And yet, he will receive the exact same thing – a place in heaven with all the joy – as disciples like Peter, James, and John, and the Apostle Paul. That thief will not have to sit in a closet up in heaven for the first billion years or so because the amount of time he worked in the vineyard was hardly any time at all compared to pretty much everyone else who will be in heaven. No. The same denarius is given to each and every worker in the parable. The same heaven, with the same joy, is given to all who are brought into the kingdom of heaven to work.

So, Jesus does, can we say, let the cat out of the bag in this parable. He reveals to us now what He will do in the end. Isn't He worried? Isn't He concerned that, knowing this, we will be lazy in our work until close to the end? Isn't Jesus concerned that we won't work so hard at striving to keep the Commandments, or that we will put just a pittance into the offering plate, or put a low priority on even being in God's house, and serving in His house, until close to quitting time? Because whether we work twelve hours or one hour in His vineyard, whether we sacrifice much or just a little for His kingdom, we are all given the same thing in the end. Maybe Jesus should be worried. Perhaps He should not have told us this parable.

But do you know who thinks this way? Those who are not in the kingdom of heaven; who look at God's vineyard from the outside and say to themselves: "Wow, that's hard work in there! That's such a sacrifice, giving so much of their time and money to their Lord!"

But that is not how the workers see it. Those who, by grace, are brought into the kingdom of God, do not say: “This is such a sacrifice! I hate giving up my time and money for the Lord. I should have waited and come in just before quitting time!”

No worker says that. No Christian is able to even think such thoughts. Because the joy of heaven that is coming, is of the same substance as the joy that we have now in serving our Lord. Christians do not have to wait for heaven to have joy. A Christian has joy now because he, or she, has the privilege of being able to work in God’s kingdom now. It’s not perfect joy because we struggle with sin and everything that sin brings to us. But it is joy.

Like with Adam and Eve. They were placed into the Garden of Eden to work. And it was pure joy for them. There was no sin at that time. So, they did not drag their feet and bemoan the effort they put forth to work the Garden. It was a delight for them.

It is sin, our own sin, that causes us to drag our feet. It is sin that causes us to hold back in our serving the Lord in His kingdom. It is our sin that fixes our eyes on our own great sacrifice for Jesus, rather than on His truly great sacrifice for us on the cross. Sin, it’s why the all-day workers were upset that the one-hour workers received the same wage as they. And it’s why we compare the work others do with what we do. There will be no sin in heaven. But it is here with us now. And so, we struggle in our serving, in our giving, in everything.

But hear this good news. Jesus died for you. Your sin is forgiven. He took the burden of your sin from you. You’ve heard this all your life, right? Do you believe it? To believe it is joy. To believe it turns your work in God’s kingdom from a feet-dragging burden into a delightful privilege.

In the parable at quitting time, those all-day workers should have said: “It’s wonderful that the one-hour workers received the same wage as us, because we had the joyful privilege of being allowed to work in the vineyard for the entire day!” But they do not say that. Nor do we when our eye is on ourself and not on Jesus.

But friend, Jesus’ eye is on you, and it always has been. Not to look for fault with you. Not to accuse you of being slothful workers in His vineyard. No. He looks at you with love. Yes, with mercy. And from His mouth is the word of forgiveness. Forgiveness for you.

In His parable, every worker is given a denarius. Yet not because they deserved it, but purely out of grace. That’s the point of the parable. It’s all by grace! A place in heaven is already yours right now by grace. It’s yours because, in your baptism, Jesus gives it to you. You didn’t earn it. He earned it for you. He calls you to work in His kingdom not to earn a place in heaven, but to give you the joyful privilege of serving Him in His vineyard now.

Whether you serve well or poorly, He delights in you because you are His baptized child. And whenever you fail in your work, He forgives you. He truly does. And because you believe this, you my fellow worker, will have the desire to serve well for whatever amount of time you are privileged to serve your Lord and Savior in His kingdom. Amen.