

## **The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)**

[www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources](http://www.storyandreligion.div.ed.ac.uk/schools/resources)

### **Keywords**

Christianity, values and issues, generosity, morality, reward

### **Notes for teachers**

As in the parable of the dishonest manager, generosity towards unexpected recipients is a key theme in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. In this parable, it is tempting to identify the landowner with God. An allegorical reading might encourage us to see the daily wage offered by the landowner as representing eternal life, or salvation more generally. The identity of the workers is more open to interpretation.

Certainly the scene described would be familiar to Jesus' hearers in and around Galilee. Here, labour was cheap and employment was precarious. From the beginning of the day, those available to work would wait to be hired by those needing labourers, and the strongest would naturally be picked first. In the story, there is some negotiation about what these first will be paid, and then they are put to work, gathering in the harvest of grapes. The last ones to be picked are likely to be the weakest, the disabled perhaps, maybe those who are from a minority ethnic group and most likely to be marginalised. By five o'clock, those who are left will have given up hope of being chosen. Perhaps they have nowhere else to go.

A denarius (the "silver coin" in the translation used here) is assumed to be a standard pay for the 12 hour day of a labourer. The story is set up so that those who have worked the full day can clearly see the latecomers receive the same amount they, those chosen first, negotiated. These latecomers are given the same pay, for less work. Those who worked all day are rebuked for complaining about this, and for assuming they will be paid more. Many readers have understandably felt that there are obvious elements of unfairness in the story, and to have sympathy with the workers who were hired first.

© Alison Jack, University of Edinburgh, 2016, CC BY NC.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

You are free to use, share and adapt this work. Not for commercial use.

Bible verses quoted are from the Good News Bible © 1994 published by the Bible Societies/HarperCollins Publishers Ltd

UK, Good News Bible © American Bible Society 1966, 1971, 1976, 1992. Used with permission.

The story might have been told to justify the economy of salvation understood by the early church, and apparently practised by the Jesus of the Gospels. Those who have a longstanding relationship with God are not to be jealous or annoyed when those who have been engaged much later in the day are given the same reward, especially when they are the weak and the marginalised. God's generosity goes beyond human notions of fairness.

A further reading of the story involves taking it in its context in the early church, rather than in the ministry of Jesus. The vineyard was often used in the Hebrew Bible as a symbol of Israel (see Isaiah 5.7- "Israel is the vineyard of the LORD Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted"). For some readers of this text, the vineyard is used in the story to suggest that Jewish and non-Jewish (or Gentile) followers of Jesus are all to be considered as God's chosen people. The story addresses any awkwardness or even hostility there might well have been between those who were followers of Jesus from the Jewish tradition, and those who have come to faith more recently, from the Gentile, non-Jewish world.

An overlooked element of the story is the way the master acts, reaching out and calling to others before they come to him. He initiates the contact, and the workers respond. Bargaining with him is not what is at the heart of this story. Rather, the master's actions are marked by radical generosity, particularly to those who others consider to be the last and the least. This might be read as a very powerful picture from the Christian tradition of the way it is understood that God deals with all people.

## **Questions for Discussion**

### Comprehension of the story

What did the man who owned the vineyard do in the story?

Why were the workers who were hired first annoyed with the man who hired them?

How did he justify his actions?

How might those who were hired last feel when they received their pay?

### Application to other contexts

What information might be useful to know about the time in which this story was first told?

Is there a difference between being generous and being fair? Is it possible to be both generous and fair? How does the story answer these questions?

What are some of the reasons why people don't have jobs today? How do issues of generosity and fairness apply to unemployed people in our society?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

This story suggests that 'the first are placed last, and the last are placed first.' What other stories from Christianity deal with this message?

For Christians, what does this story teach about how they should live their lives?

## **The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard** **(Matthew 20:1-16)**

The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the marketplace at nine o'clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, so he told them, 'You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.' So they went. Then at twelve o'clock and again at three o'clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the marketplace and saw some other men still standing there. 'Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?' he asked them. 'No one hired us,' they answered. 'Well, then, you go and work in the vineyard,' he told them.

When evening came, the owner told his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.' The men who had begun to work at five o'clock were paid a silver coin each. So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'while we put up with a whole day's work in the hot sun—yet you paid them the same as you paid us!' 'Listen, friend,' the owner answered one of them, 'I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day's work for one silver coin. Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?'"

And Jesus concluded, "So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last."