

# Matthew 20:1-16: The Laborers in the Vineyard

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Email: [preteristadvocate@gmail.com](mailto:preteristadvocate@gmail.com).

## Bible Version

Scripture quotations are adapted from the 1611 King James Version (KJV).

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(With minor changes made on the basis of the Greek text.)

## The Parable

1. 20:1: The parable illustrates some aspect of God's kingdom.
2. 20:2: The laborers agreed to be paid a Roman denarius — “the average price of the unskilled labour of the tiller of the soil, ... an adequate and just payment.” [Charles Ellicott]<sup>1</sup>  
As casual workers they would have been grateful for having being hired.
3. 20:6-7: Some men weren't hired until 5 pm: Were they lazy, as perhaps implied by the landowner's question? Yet they seem quite willing to work.
4. 20:8: Paid at the end of the day, in accordance with the biblical requirement for day laborers (Dt 24:15).
5. 20:8: The last were paid first, for two reasons:  
First, in keeping with the point of the parable.  
Second, it was necessary for those hired first to have their expectations raised — they needed to know what those hired later received.
6. 20:11-12: Grumbling and objection by those hired first.  
20:12: *“These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”*  
Reference is perhaps to the scorching east wind from the Arabian Desert that sapped a person's strength.
7. 20:13: “Friend” carries (on Jesus' lips) with it a tone of reproof (cf. Mt 22:12; 26:50).<sup>1</sup>
8. 20:15: *“Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Or is thine eye evil because I am good?”*  
Envy or jealousy = an evil eye.

## Brief Commentary

1. 20:1: “For ...”. Greek: *gar* (Strong's G1063), meaning “for”, “because”, “since” “indeed” — “a conjunction used to express cause, explanation, inference or continuation”.<sup>2</sup>  
The parable thus serves to illustrate the principle just enunciated:  
*“But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first”* (Mt 19:30).  
That this is indeed the parable's intent is confirmed in 20:16.
2. This principle (and therefore the parable) relates back to prior discussion and teaching:  
To Jesus' response to Peter: the certainty of rewards for all who have sacrificed for his sake (Mt 19:27-29).  
To the rich man who sought to earn eternal life (Mt 19:16-22).  
To the need for childlikeness: humility, and reception of the kingdom as a gift (Mt 18:1-4; 19:13-14).

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers, comments on Matthew 20:13, via the Bible Hub website: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/matthew/20.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> From the Bible Hub entry for Strong's G1063: <https://biblehub.com/greek/1063.htm>.

3. The final reward is the same for everyone: eternal life in heaven (Mt 19:21, 29).
4. The parable is concerned with God's character: his generosity.  
 Later workers received far more than they deserved.  
 The landowner chose to be generous; he had a perfect right to do so (20:15).  
 The earlier workers' response is the normal human response: we typically expect to be rewarded according to our effort. But these workers should have praised his generosity rather than impugn his action.  
 We enter the kingdom through God's grace and generosity. He's under no obligation to "employ" us.  
 So, we must appreciate his grace and not have feelings of entitlement.  
 Every one of us is like the 11th-hour workers — gaining far more than we deserve.  
 An attitude of gratitude is therefore appropriate.
5. We are indeed privileged to be called by God to work for his cause and kingdom.  
 And while there certainly are rewards related to one's commitment (Mt 19:29), we should always keep in mind that we are "unworthy" (ESV, NASB) or "unprofitable" (KJV) servants (Lk 17:10).
6. Possible applications of this parable:
  - The Jewish religious leaders' criticism of the grace Jesus showed to "sinners" (Lk 15:1-2).  
 In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the elder son (representing these leaders) became angry on account of his father's kindness towards the wayward son (Lk 15:28).  
 The elder son had feelings of entitlement, having for many years faithfully served his father (Lk 15:29).  
 In fact, many translations have him declaring that he had worked for or served his father "like a slave",<sup>3</sup> implying a poor understanding of his relationship with his father.<sup>4</sup>
  - Jewish envy of Gentiles entering the kingdom on an equal footing (Ac 13:45; Gal 3:28; Eph 2:18) — the Jews having long endured the burden of the Mosaic Law (Ac 15:1, 10).
  - Being envious of the gifts and service of others in the kingdom:  
 God apportions gifts and ministries as he sees fit.
  - Criticism towards those saved on their deathbeds. Or criminals coming to faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Among these are the CEV, ERV, EXB, NET, and NRSV. Cf. "slaved" in Phillips and TLV; "slaving" in DLNT, HCSB, and NIV.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this parable should be called the Parable of the Lost Sons.