

# THE PARABLE OF WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD: GOD'S GLORIOUS GRACE MATHEW 20:01–16

## *Introduction*

This is one of the most meaningful parables in Scripture, yet the meaning is sometimes missed. Christ was continuing His discussion of salvation (Mt. 19:25) and eternal life (Mt. 19:29). (Note Mt. 19:27-30.) What He now wished to do was show the *marvellous grace of God in salvation*, in giving eternal life. This He did by sharing a parable — a parable which demonstrates God's marvellous grace as few other lessons do.

- I. God's grace provides work for man — a field to tend (v. 1).
- II. God's grace seeks and calls men to work (vv. 1-7).
- III. God's grace pays the promised wages: at the appointed time, at the end of the day (vv. 8-15).
- IV. God's justice will pay exactly what He promised (v. 16).

## **I. *Mathew 20:01 Fruits of God's Grace***

God's grace provides work for man, a field to tend. Two significant facts are being stressed.

1. It is God who provides work for man, who gives a field to be tended. The great Landowner is God. The vineyard or field can be either the world or the church. The world, the church, and man himself are all due to God's grace. It is God's grace that has created man. It is God's grace that has provided the field (the world and church) for man to work in. Without God there would be nothing (Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16f).
2. It is God who goes out to seek and call men to work. It is not the workers who come to Him. God's going out after man is grace, marvellous grace (Lk. 19:10; Jn. 3:16; 15:16). Every step involved in the call of God is of grace: the call itself, the challenge to go and labour, the promise of wages (reward), the acceptance of the responses, and the sending forth into the field. God did not have to issue a call or take any of the steps taken. Each step is a marvellous demonstration of God's care and grace.

Note another matter: the soul of man serves something. It either serves self and sin or God and righteousness. Man either works for the world and its end or for heaven and its end (Rom. 6:16-22). It is for this reason that God issues call after call.

**Mat 9:37-38** *Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

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**John 4:35-36** *“Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.”*

**Luke 12:42-43** *The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns.”*

**Luke 19:12-13** *He said: “A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. ‘Put this money to work,’ he said, ‘until I come back.’”*

## **II. Mathew 20:01-07 God's call and Reward**

The early call is God's very first call to a person. It is directed at a person when there is a special willingness and eagerness to serve God. The first call is God's beginning to speak to the heart of a person. There is a tug, a pull, a voice, a thought, a movement in one's heart to listen and turn to God.

Note two things.

1. The landowner promised the workers a full wage. If the willing workers believed his promise, they would go into the fields and work. If they did not believe his promise, they would not go. Their belief preceded their work. He promised, and they believed and served.

God's call is by grace, not by works. The fact that Christ speaks of work and wages does not in any sense mean that salvation is earned, that it is of works. We are saved by God's grace through faith (Rom. 4:3-5; Eph. 2:8-10).

2. The time of service was a day, which symbolizes a lifetime. When the day (life) ended, the willing workers would receive the promise of the landowner. They would be rewarded with exactly what he had promised, and the reward would be theirs forever. The day was but a brief period of time in comparison with having their needs met. They could withstand any trial (burden or heat. v. 12) for just a day, for it would soon end.

They had two things to encourage them to remain with the work: they had only a short period of time to work, only one day, and they had the presence of the landowner himself. He was constantly encouraging them, fellowshiping with them and reminding them of his promise.

**Mat 22:9** *‘Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’*

**1 Tim 2:4** *Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

**Deu 30:15** *See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.*

## MATHEW 20:03–04 CALL, PURPOSE

*About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the market place doing nothing. He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." **Mathew 20:03-04***

The late-comer's call is a later call to a person. Every city has its labour market hang-out. Any of us who have dealt with the labour market know that an employer often finds that he needs more workers as the day progresses. So he returns to call for more workers. Each time he returns it is, so to speak, an act of grace — he meets the need of more men.

An employer who asks workers to join his working force meets all kinds of responses.

1. There are the *willing and eager* workers. These are always out early, needing and looking for work. They realize and know their need, and they are extremely responsible in doing all they can to provide for their needs. Often they are men who want purpose, meaning, and significance as much as they want physical provision.
2. There are what Christ calls *the idle*. They have little if any interest in work at all. They are there simply because it is a gathering place where they can find company and pass time away.
3. There are the *self-seeking* or *pleasure workers*. They move around questioning each employer about what kind of work is to be done. If the work sounds too difficult or not enjoyable and pleasing, they refuse, choosing to wait for something more pleasing and enjoyable. However, later on in the day, after nothing else more satisfying has come along, they are willing to heed the call of the earlier employer.
4. There are the *slothful workers*. These are just lazy, not interested in a full-day's work. They prefer lying around, being loose and unobligated rather than exerting the energy and effort required by work. They choose to live with less rather than to work a full day. Thus, they show up at the marketplace only when they need a little work.
5. There are the *complacent workers*, the slow-movers. They sleep late, move slow, and are always late in getting to the marketplace. They could care less if they miss the better opportunities, just so they are able to get enough to meet their immediate needs.
6. There are the workers who are *weak failures*. These go to work at jobs that appeal to them, but they discover the jobs are hard and difficult. So they walk away from their commitment and return to the marketplace for something easier.

The parallel with God's late-comer call is easily seen. Note two things about the late-comer call that is different from the early call.

1. The call to work is more forceful: "You also go." It has to be more forceful. All of these have already rejected the early call or else were not present to hear the call. Some of the day (of their life) has already passed and can never be recovered. It takes more force and more convincing to stir most of the late-comers.
2. The promise of a wage (reward) is promised but not an amount. The Lord merely said, "I will pay you whatever is right." A late-comer, the person who does not respond to God until later in life, must simply trust God to be fair and just. The promise is that He will give *a just reward*.

*2 Th 3:11 We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies.*

*Heb 6:12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

*Prov 18:9 One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys.*

*Prov 24:30-31 I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. □*

## MATHEW 20:05 CALL, PURPOSE

*He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. **Mathew 20:05***

The constant call is the occasional movement of God in the heart of man. There is nothing so tragic as a person who is unemployed, that is, not serving God in this world and in the church. God cares and God has plenty of work for every man to do. Therefore, He tries and tries to reach the heart of man, calling at every hour He can. Note three things about the constant call of God.

1. It is God's great compassion for all of us that keeps His calling to us.
2. The calls of God are limited; they are only periodic. In the parable, only four calls have been issued up to this point. There is only one more call to go, only five calls in a day and in a life. God's movement, His Spirit does not always contend with us (Gen. 6:3). We know this by experience. When *the contending* begins in our heart or mind (whether through reading, hearing a message, or whatever) and we ignore it and do not make a decision immediately, it diminishes and finally quits. It leaves us, and we continue on just as we always have.

3. The calls of God become dimmer and dimmer and less forceful with the rejection of each call.

=> Our conscience becomes harder; our minds less impressionable.

=> Our hearts become less sensitive; our ego more self-centred.

=> Our thoughts become more worldly; our lives more encumbered.

=> Our wills become more sluggish (Prov. 29:1).

**Josh 24:15** *“But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”*

**1 Kng 18:21** *Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.*

**Jer 35:15** *Again and again I sent all my servants the prophets to you. They said, “Each of you must turn from your wicked ways and reform your actions; do not follow other gods to serve them. Then you will live in the land I have given to you and your fathers.” But you have not paid attention or listened to me.*

**Ezek 33:11** *Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’*

**Hosea 6:1** *“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.”* □

### MATHEW 20:05 JEWISH TIME

A Jewish day began at 6.00 a.m. and ended at 6.00 p.m. The early call was issued before 6.00 a.m., the hour that work would begin. The late-comer call would have been issued at 9.00 a.m. when a fourth of the day (a life) had already passed. The sixth hour was 12.00 noon; the ninth hour was 3.00 p.m., and the eleventh hour was 5.00 p.m. □

### MATHEW 20:06–07 CALL, PURPOSE, DECISION

*About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’* **Matthew 20:06-07**

The final call is the last call of God to a man — it is the eleventh-hour call. Note what happens with the persons who wait until the eleventh hour.

1. God strongly rebukes them, much more forcibly than any of the others: “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?” There is no excuse for such behaviour.
2. They excuse themselves: no one has hired us. Such is not the case; they lie, deceiving their own hearts.
3. God shows grace despite their deceptive excuse: He issues a forceful call and a promise of a just wage.

But note something: nothing is said about how many responded. Just think. How many actually would respond to go out for just one hour's work? How many would be willing to trust after rejecting four other offers during a single day? Realistically, not many would respond.

Three very practical things militate against a person who waits until the eleventh hour to accept God's call.

1. A man does not often know when the eleventh hour is. Few know when they are to die, much less when God shall call for the last time.
2. A man in the eleventh hour has little time to serve. A man who has failed to capture an opportunity that has passed tends to accuse and condemn himself. He senses unworthiness. There is little likelihood that he will sense God's call to the point of responding.
3. A man in the eleventh hour who has rejected call after call is hard, very hard. There is little softness and sensitivity left to respond to God's call — no matter how forceful.

**Mat 22:3** “He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.”

**John 5:40** “Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

**Rom 10:21** But concerning Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”

**Jer 7:13** While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer.

**Hosea 9:17** My God will reject them because they have not obeyed him; they will be wanderers among the nations. □

### III. *Mathew 20:08–15 Time of Distributing Promised Wages*

God's grace pays the promised wages to those who have worked for Him. He will pay at the appointed time. When is the appointed time? In the evening, at death, when all work ends. This is the meaning of the *evening*, of *the appointed time*. There are two *evenings*, two appointed times for the servant of God.

First, there is the evening or the time of death when the servant passes from this life into God's presence. He receives his reward of eternal life. God transports him into the LORD's presence, and the believer is transformed into the image of Christ (See 1 Jn. 3:2). This is the reward of wages referred to in this parable.

Second, there is the evening or the appointed time of judgment when the servants' works are to be judged (See *Judgment Seat of Christ*, 2 Cor. 5:10). This evening of judgment is *not* what this parable is about.

1. The foreman is Christ, God's Son, to whom God has committed all judgment (Jn. 5:22; 2 Cor. 5:10).
2. God pays everyone out of a heart of grace and care. This is so critical to understand: God is love and He cares. He cares for all servants, no matter how old or how long they have been serving Him. He cares, wanting the workers to have enough to meet their needs. A day's wage (the reward of eternal life) was necessary to meet their need. He would have no servant go away without at least that much. Therefore, He pays even the *late-comers* a full wage (eternal life).

Note another point, when we speak of eternal life and perfection, that is, of being conformed to the nature and image of Christ, God shows no preference. We shall all be made just like Christ, perfected in nature.

=> We shall have different responsibilities and, apparently, varying degrees of glory; but we shall all be perfected in nature.

=> We shall all face the Judgment Seat of Christ. We shall all receive different duties in heaven because of good and bad service here on earth, but we shall all be perfectly happy and joyful in what we do. We shall all be judged for our faithfulness on this earth. Some shall be set up as large articles and others as smaller instruments, but we shall all be perfectly complete and filled to the brim (2 Tim. 2:20-21).

=> We shall all give an account for the trust and gifts put into our keeping. We shall all be rewarded accordingly, but we shall all be perfectly fulfilled. We shall all stand before Christ for what fruit we have borne on earth, but we shall all be perfectly satisfied and fruitful.

**Luke 14:23** *Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.'*

**Mat 8:11** *I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.*

3. God's pay (reward) is not based on works and energy. It is based on God's grace and justice, and it is based God's concern and care for all.
  - a. Note that God is gracious and just and caring. God's grace and care do not annul or erase His justice. God is not unjust (Rom. 4:5-6).
    - => When God gives work to a man who is desperate for work, it is a caring and gracious act. Such was the case with the early call to the eager worker. Not to take advantage of the man's desperation is an act of grace. To offer and pay a full wage and not take advantage of the man is not unjust but the very opposite. It is a just and gracious act, a very caring act.
    - => Similarly, when God pays a man more than what he earned because God cares that the man has enough to live, it is a gracious and caring act. It is not an unjust act against the first or earlier worker. It is simply a gracious act that reveals God to be an enormously caring Person.
    - => If God gives us what He promised us, He is not unjust if He gives something to someone else. He is not even unjust to us if He gives an enormous gift to another person. He is just, and He is enormously caring and gracious by keeping His Word and giving to us *and to the other person*.
  - b. Note that the complaining by the earlier workers causes some to apply the parable to the relationship between God and the Jews and the Gentiles. The earlier workers, representing the Jews, complain because God gives an equal pay (reward and position in His kingdom) to the Gentiles. Almost any commentary will give insight into this interpretation if the reader wishes to pursue it.
4. God's pay (reward) is not as man sees but as God knows and wills. Our eyes are evil because we are of an evil world. Therefore, we judge and understand from an imperfect and selfish stance. God is good; He cares and is full of mercy and grace. Therefore, He gives eternal life to all who come, no matter when they come, at the early call or the eleventh-hour call.

*Acts 15:11* No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

*Rom 3:24* And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

*Eph 2:8-9* For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.

*Titus 2:11* For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

*Titus 3:7* So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.



## 2 CORINTHIANS 05:10 JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. 2 Corinthians 05:10*

This is the judgment of believers, not of unbelievers. Note carefully the words, "We must all appear." By "we...all" Paul means all those who have a nature like him, a new nature in Christ. That is, all those who believe in Christ are the ones who will stand at the judgment seat of Christ. Several important points are stressed.

1. The judgment of believers is a surety: it will happen and nothing can stop it from happening. "We *must* all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." Not a single believer will be excused from the judgment.
2. The believer will be judged by Christ Himself. *Every believer* will face the scrutiny and searching eyes of Christ and be judged.

**John 5:22-23** *"Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him."*

**Acts 10:42** *He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.*

**Acts 17:31** *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*

**Rom 2:16** *This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.*

**Rom 14:10** *You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.*

**2 Cor 5:10** *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

**2 Tim 4:1** *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge.*

3. The believer will be judged for "the things done while (dia) in the body." What kinds of things are done in the human body? Acts, behaviour, works. Note three significant points.
  - a. The believer's sins are forgiven once he has confessed and repented of them (Eph. 1:7; 1 Jn. 1:9; 2:1-2). He never has to worry about God charging him with

sin, for Christ has already paid the penalty for his sins. His sins are forgiven once-for-all.

- b. The believer will be conformed perfectly to the image of Christ. In fact, he is even predestined by God to eternal perfection just like God's own dear Son (see notes, Rom. 8:29; 1 Jn. 3:2). He is destined to receive a perfect and an eternal body — a body just like Christ's (1 Cor. 15:50-58).
- c. However, the believer is called and gifted for a special task and work while on earth (1 Cor. 12:4-14:40; Eph.4:7-13). Just how well the believer accomplishes this task and work will determine his judgment (see notes, 1 Cor. 3:13-15; 6:2-3; 9:24-27, esp. 9:27; Mt. 19:27-30; 25:20-23; Lk. 16:10-12; 19:15-23).
4. The judgment of the believer will determine his reward and the degree of reward, whether good (gain) or bad (loss). Some believers will definitely be ashamed before Christ at His coming (1 Jn. 2:28), and they will suffer loss (1 Cor. 3:11-15). The believer who survives the fire of judgment will be greatly rewarded, so greatly that the rewards explode the human mind (see note, Rewards, 1 Cor. 3:13-15 for a complete list of the rewards).
5. When studying the judgment of believers, several passages need to be studied carefully (see outline and notes, 1 Cor. 3:13-15; 6:2-3; 9:24-27, esp. 9:27; Mt. 19:27-30; 25:20-23; Lk.16:10-12; 19:15-23; See *Sin and Believer's Judgement*, Jn. 5:16). □

#### **IV. *Mathew 20:16 Justice and Reward***

This is the very statement that caused Christ to share the parable — “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (see Mt. 19:30; 20:16). Remember that the disciples needed assurance of their salvation. Christ gave them assurance and promised the reward of ruling and reigning with Him and living forever (Mt. 19:27-30. Note Mt. 19:27-30.) But Christ wanted them to know that could not judge others, for they could not tell what was within a man, not for sure. They did not know who was to be highly rewarded and who was not.

For example, who would have ever thought that the willing and eager workers who immediately responded to the LORD would expose a grumbling, jealous spirit? To prevent His servants from judging and showing preference among themselves, Christ closes His discussion of eternal life and salvation with a strong warning: the last will be first.

That is, many of the last (late-comers) will outstrip us unless we are fervent and zealous in serving God. We may have professed and served Christ for years before others did; yet we may...

- fail to worship Christ day by day as consistently as the later workers
- fail to grow in the knowledge of Christ as eagerly as the later workers

- fail to study the Scriptures and pray as much as the later workers
- fail to use our gifts as faithfully as the later workers
- fail to witness as boldly as the later workers
- fail to give all that we are and have as willingly and sacrificially as the later workers
- fail to love as meekly as the later workers
- fail to respond as kindly as the later workers
- fail to live as unselfishly as the later workers
- fail to relate as lovingly as the later workers
- fail to endure as patiently as the later workers
- fail to look for the return of Christ as hopefully as the later workers

Note: Christ seems to switch from discussing the gift of eternal life to warning His servant that there will be a judgment of works — a judgment that will determine degrees of glory and position and responsibility (See *Judgment Seat of Christ*, 2 Cor. 5:10).

*Luke 1:52* He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

*Luke 6:25* Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

*Psa 75:7* But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.

*Luke 16:25* But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'

*Psa 147:6* The Lord sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground. ■

### MATHEW 20:16 JUSTICE

*"So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Mathew 20:16*

This footnote is placed last because it deals with a different subject than the outline above. *Is God unjust in His treatment of men?* This is the charge levelled against God by the willing and eager servant (vv. 10-15). Men often question and charge God with being unjust. Such an unholy charge is caused by religious and theological discussions and by wrong belief and unbelief. The charge is also levelled against God when a crisis arises and we question, "How could God do that or let that happen?"

The New Testament discusses the question of God's being unjust in three passages (See pts. 3 and 4 Mt. 20:8-15; also Rom. 3:5-8; Rom. 9:14-33). □