

# Meeting With Christ

---

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

## THE PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

---

### Matthew 20:1-16

In our last lesson, we discussed the meaning of Jesus' words in Matthew 19:30: *But many who are first will be last, and the last first.* This statement is cited again a few verses later, in Matthew 20:16. Sandwiched between these two verses, we find a story called the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. I believe that the parable has been inserted there as an illustration of the 'first and last' saying. Let's look at this story.

*Matthew 20:1. "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*

*2 "And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.*

*3 "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place;*

*4 and to those he said, 'You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went.*

*5 "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing.*

*6 "And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?'*

*7 "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You too go into the vineyard.'*

*8 "And when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.'*

*9 "And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.*

*10 "And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius.*

*11 "And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner,*

*12 saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.'*

*13 "But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?'*

*14 'Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.*

*15 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?'*

*16 "Thus the last shall be first, and the first last."*

### Equal wages for unequal work

The owner of a vineyard has determined to harvest his grapes on a particular day. Early in the morning, at about 6 o'clock, he leaves his house and goes to the marketplace where casual workers

gather awaiting employment. He hires several people, offering them the regular day-laborer's wage of a denarius for the day.

In those days, people worked from sunrise to sunset. It was a 12-hour work day. This is important to keep in mind when we will talk about people coming at the 11th hour.

Then the owner goes out again at the 3rd hour (9 o'clock in the morning) and hires more workers. He is promising them a fair wage, though he does not specify the amount.

As the work progresses in the field, he realizes that he will need more workers. He returns to the marketplace at the 6th hour (noon) and the 9th hour (3 o'clock in the afternoon) and gets more people to work for him.

By late afternoon, it becomes apparent that the work cannot be completed before dark unless extra men come in. So at the 11th hour (5 o'clock in the afternoon), one hour before the end of the working day, he goes back to the marketplace and is still able to find some men standing around. He asks them why they are in the marketplace at this hour of the day. The reason is that no one has come to offer them work. Then he says to them, 'You come and work in my vineyard.' There is no mention of how much they will be paid.

At sunset, the workers are called to collect their money. The master gives one denarius to each worker, even to those who have worked only one hour. Seeing this, the men who worked all day protest loudly about what they perceive as an injustice. The owner points out that they received exactly what they were promised and goes on to assert his right to use his money as he wishes.

## **Self-examination**

Let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of these workers. Five groups of workers were hired in the story. The first group was hired at sunrise, at the first hour of the day. The second group was hired at the 3rd hour. The third group was hired at the 6th hour. The 4th group was hired at the 9th hour. The 5th and last group was hired at the 11th hour.

The owner of the vineyard instructed his manager to begin payment with those who arrived last. Remember that only the workers hired at the first hour were promised one denarius for the day. Those employed at the 3rd hour were told that they will be paid whatever is right. And those hired later in the day are not even told about wages.

The last workers came at the 11th hour and they worked for only one hour. They probably thought that they would get one 'pondion,' i.e., 1/12th of a denarius since they worked 1/12th of the workday. They were very surprised when they received their pay: a whole denarius! So the next group thought, 'That's amazing! They got one denarius! We worked for three hours, from 3 pm until now. Maybe we will receive three denarius.' It is quite likely that the other groups made the same calculation: one denarius for one hour of work. But in the end, all the workers received one denarius regardless of the length of time they spent working in the field.

What are your thoughts when you hear a story like that? How do you feel about a boss who treats his employees in this way? How you react to this parable depends on who you identify with. Did you identify with the first group of workers? Did you identify with the second, the third or the fourth group? Or did you identify with the group that was hired last in the story?

If you had identified with the first group of people, you would have felt a sense of indignation, a sense of injustice. 'This is not the way to treat people who had worked the whole day. If you want to be kind, at least be kind to everyone. Don't be just nice in a selective sort of way.' Is that how you felt?

Or did you feel moderately indignant? Did you say to yourself, 'The owner of the vineyard is a peculiar person who decided to use his money in a peculiar way. That is his right. 'Can't I do what I want with my money?', he said. Who can argue with that? 'Of course he can do what he wants with his money. But at least, do it fairly. Do it in a way that will not frustrate anyone.'

Or did you feel joyful? If you did, you identified with the last group. You thought, 'These men, they also have a wife and children to take care of at home. Earning 1/12 of a denarius is not enough for the daily needs of a family. It's wonderful that the master was sensitive to their needs and gave them the full day's pay. He is a man of great generosity.'

### **The 'unfairness' of grace**

I think that most of us naturally sympathize with the first group of workers. We feel that it is not fair. We are used to the principle that he who works the longest receives the most pay. And normally, the pay is in proportion to the amount of time you spend doing a job or to the amount of work you accomplish.

But the parable shows that the kingdom of heaven does not operate on that basis. God's grace simply cannot be divided into neatly proportioned quantities adjusted to merits or abilities. Rather, God liberally gives the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and joy. Those who come to God, regardless of their background and no matter how late in life they come, will all be accepted by Him.

It is true that grace can seem unfair. In fact, from the human viewpoint, grace is always unfair because it gives undeserving people more than what they actually deserve. The complaint of the first group is not that the master broke his word or that he cheated. Their complaint is that he was too generous with the undeserving. They said, 'It's not fair. We worked all day long, perspiring in the heat, and we receive only one denarius.' Notice how they boasted of their hard work. *We have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day* (v. 12). This reaction reminds us of the religious leaders who could boast of their fidelity, but at the same time they find it offensive that Jesus actively welcomed the outcasts of the society into His fellowship. In this, they were in danger of shutting themselves out of the kingdom. Jesus made precisely this point to His Jewish opponents in Matthew 21:31: *I tell you the truth, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,* religious leaders. Thus, those who appeared for a time to be first, are in reality last; and those who appeared to be last, are first.

### **An attitude problem**

I would like to draw your attention to the attitude of the first group. Because it is not just a matter of fairness. It is also a question of attitude. The key element of the attitude of the workers in the first group is found, in my opinion, in v. 15. This is what the master said.

*Matthew 20:15. Or is your eye **envious** because I am generous?*

'Are you envious because I show generosity to others? Does it make you jealous to see others enjoy my generosity?'

They were upset about the fact that the men who came later were made equal with them. They envied the other workers their share of the master's generosity. But do you see what happened as a consequence of their envious attitude? It deprived them of the good which was granted to them. Their jealousy prevented them from receiving the goodness of the master.

Try to imagine what would have happened if they had a positive attitude. 'It does not matter the number of hours each person had worked. The fact that the master paid a denarius to everyone is

pure goodness. We are so happy that all the workers could count on a sufficient amount of money to support their families.' With a view of the situation like this, I think the people who were first would have rejoiced with those who were last. They would have praised the owner of the vineyard for his excellent wisdom and goodness. Unfortunately, their grumbling attitude made it impossible for them to taste the master's goodness. They could not enjoy their denarius. This is also true for us. By having a begrudging attitude, we can prevent God's grace from being effective in our lives.

You know, God's grace should not be viewed only as a favor granted to someone who does not deserve it. God's grace is also a power, a power to change you when you can do nothing for yourself. We can see this aspect of grace in Titus 2:11-12.

*Titus 2:11. For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, 12 training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world.*

Grace brings salvation. It is the favor of God showered upon men who do not deserve His favor. But God's grace means something else. Notice what it does. It trains us. It trains us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts. And at the same time, it trains us to live soberly and righteously in this present world. This is the transforming aspect of grace. Grace is something that comes into our life, training us to renounce ungodliness, and making us holy and righteous.

### ***Rejoice with those who rejoice***

Being a Christian means being transformed. It means an utterly new way of thinking, a new mentality, a new attitude. In Romans 12:15, Paul writes, *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.* This is a totally new attitude. Because we normally rejoice only when something good is done to us. Why should we rejoice when something good happens to other people? But when you are transformed by the grace of God, you behave differently than the world. You are able to rejoice over the success of others and to show your joy by congratulating and joining them in their moment of joy.

This is what the first group of workers were not able to do. They could not rejoice with those who were so happy to receive that denarius for which they worked only one hour. Instead, they were annoyed and jealous, and they grumbled. 'It's not fair! What about us? If they get one denarius, we should get more.'

Why could they not rejoice? Because they were more concerned with their own interests, their own good, than they were with the needs of others.

That was the complaint of Paul concerning his fellow Christians in Philippians 2. In Philippians 2, Paul wanted to send somebody to the church in Philippi, but he could not find anyone, except Timothy. Now, that is not the tragic part. The tragic part is the comment he made about other Christians. Philippians 2:19-21.

*Philippians 2:19. But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition.*

*20 For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare.*

*21 For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.*

Of the list of believers he knew, Paul could think only of Timothy to send. Why? Because the others, to a greater or lesser extent, put their own interests first, not those of Christ. And a person who does not put the interest of Christ first will not look to the interests of others. He will not identify with others when they rejoice.

## First and last in the parable

We mentioned at the beginning of the lesson that the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is an illustration of Jesus' statement, *Many who are first will be last, and the last first*. Now that we understand the parable better, we need to explain specifically what is being portrayed in the story in connection with the first-last principle. I will summarize it in four points.

Here is the first point. Many people considered first in the Lord's work will be revealed at the judgment as last and lost. And many people thought last and spiritually inferior will be revealed at judgment as first. At the day of judgment, there will be many surprises.

Secondly, this parable is Jesus' way of responding to Peter's question in Matthew 19:27. *Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?* Jesus first told the disciples that their sacrifices will be wonderfully rewarded (19:28-29). But now, He has this word of caution for them. 'Do not pride yourselves in your sacrifices. If you look down on people who seem to have made less sacrifices than you, that can lead you to an awful judgment.' The believers should know both the promises and the perils of Christian work: the promise of abundant reward for faithful service (19:28-29) and the peril of severe judgment for proud self-consciousness (20:1-16).

Thirdly, this parable shows the amazing grace of God who lifts those who are considered last, the less fruitful people and the spiritual latecomers, into places of honor. The last become first in this story not because they have done enough good works but because they have a good and generous Lord. This Lord invites them into his field at various hours, even at the latest possible hour, and pays them as though they had done a full day's work.

And fourthly, the story can be viewed as a warning from Jesus to disciples not to feel too superior when they compare themselves to people like the rich young ruler who decided not to follow Jesus. Today, this warning can apply to mainline churches which despise newer kinds of churches, to growing churches that look down on seemingly slower churches, to long-time church members who ignore newcomers, to strong Christians who question the dedication of weaker Christians, to believers who are too conscious of their being in God's work and who think demeaningly of those who are not involved in any ministry.

I will conclude with the words of John in 2John 8: *Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward*. Watch yourself. See that your spirit is right, that there is no selfishness or envy.