

ViralStJames Bible Study #11: The Workers in the Vineyard

The Background: “God, that’s not fair!”

Matthew 20:1-16

The pandemic has seen some extraordinary situations. One of these has been the ‘furlough’ scheme, whereby millions of people have been paid to be sat at home with nothing to do whilst their neighbours who haven’t been furloughed continue to work. On sunny Spring days, those at work could grumble at the apparent unfairness of their neighbours relaxing in their gardens (or on the beach) whilst they had to work.

Fairness and fair play are often seen as highly desirable characteristics. So the story Jesus told of the workers in the vineyard still has the ability to shock, as it would have done at the time. What was he getting at?

The Passage

Matt. 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 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The Questions

- 1) Read the passage through in one go. What is your first reaction to this story? If you were one of the first workers to be hired, how do you think you’d feel on receiving your pay once you’d seen what the last workers to be hired were paid – can you identify with their grumbling (v11-12)?

Now put yourself in the shoes of the last workers to be hired – how do you think they felt when they were paid (v9)?

- 2) The pay that all the labourers received was equivalent to a living wage for the day. Knowing this, do you think the workers who were hired earlier still had a legitimate cause to grumble?

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- 3) Although the story is called the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, the Kingdom of heaven is actually likened to the landowner in the story (v1). In what ways do you think God's Kingdom is like the landowner in the parable?
- 4) Would you agree that one of the points Jesus was trying to get across was that the Kingdom of God is characterised by generosity? Can you think of other examples where Jesus demonstrated generosity?
- 5) Are we tempted to think too much about what we can do to 'earn' the life of the world to come when all we need to do is receive, and seek to live in the light of God's generosity? How easy is it to receive, to accept generosity and grace?
- 6) Why do you think this story follows the one about the Rich Young Man in the previous chapter? (Mathew 19 16-30).
- 7) Read Luke 23 v 39-43. This episode is sometimes called 'The Parable of the Penitent thief'. Can you see any parallels between the two parables? Is it fair that the thief is promised paradise?
- 8) Who do you think was a good neighbour in this parable? Is this parable partly a challenge about loving your neighbour?
- 9) In Matthew 20 v 16, the parable ends with Jesus stating that 'the last will be first, and the first will be last' – repeating what he said at the end of the engagement with the rich young man (Matt 19. v 30). What do you think he meant by this?
- 10) What do you take away from this reflection?

The Space for notes
