

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like a Landowner

Matthew 20:1–16 (NKJV)

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

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

³And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

⁴and said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went.

⁵Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.

⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’

⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’

⁸“So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’

⁹And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.

¹⁰But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.

¹¹And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner,

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

¹³But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’

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

¹⁵Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’

¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.”

Matthew 20:1–16 (NKJV)

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

- *This parable begins with the words: “For the kingdom of heaven is like...” The Gospel of Matthew employs this expression eleven times as a similitude providing points of comparison with earthly events or relationships corresponding to how the kingdom of heaven operates.*
- *The kingdom of heaven is likened to a man sowing good seed in his field (Matthew 13:24); a mustard seed which a man planted in his field (13:31); leaven that grows and spreads (13:33); a treasure hidden in a field (13:44); a beautiful and costly pearl (13:45); a dragnet catching every kind of fish (13:47);*

a certain king wanting to settle accounts with his servants (18:23); a king arranging a marriage for his son (22:2); five wise and five foolish virgins waiting for the bridegroom (25:1); a man going on a long journey and delivering his goods to his servants (25:14).

- *We can study each of these similitudes and learn many wonderful and useful things regarding the kingdom of heaven, how it operates, and how we are to live. Each similitude reflects a simple example that carries with it deep and profound truths that will be revealed to those who are willing to meditate, pray, and study them.*
- *When studying these similitudes it can also be useful to compare them with one another because the similarities and contrasts also provide us with important insights into the kingdom of heaven.*
- *This parable found in Matthew 20 is unique. In contrast to other parables involving labourers, all the labourers in this parable received exactly the same wages although the amount of time they laboured and the effort they expended varied greatly.*
- *In a similar parable found in Luke 19, a certain nobleman who was leaving on a journey gave each of his servants a mina. Upon the nobleman's return he called each of his servants to see how they had fared. One servant had taken his one mina and earned ten minas for his master. His master's response was, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.' (Luke 19:17). A second servant had taken the mina and earned five minas and the master "likewise said to him, 'You also be over five cities.'" (Luke 19:19).*
- *In this parable the servants received rewards in proportion to how successful and fruitful they had been with what they had been given. The more the servants had increased their mina, the greater the reward they were given.*
- *However, the reward each servant received far outweighed what the servants had actually earned for their master. A mina is about three month's wages. The servant who earned his master ten minas was given authority to rule over ten cities!*
- *Therefore, we can see that even though the servants were rewarded for their faithful service by multiplying the mina that each had been given, in reality what they received from their master was in fact an expression of the master's*

grace and generosity and not because the master was obliged or indebted to them. “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” (Romans 11:35, TNIV).

- *The original mina was the master’s in the first place. Everything we possess we have received from God. In fact, everything we accomplish also comes from God’s hand. “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.” (1 Corinthians 3:6–7).*
- *Our part is simply to put our trust in Christ and obey the simple things He commands us to do! He does all the rest and then rewards us extravagantly and generously for what He has accomplished through us! What grace!*
- *Even the rewards, crowns, and inheritances that God promises to those are willing to obey and trust Him is something we have not earned by our own merit but by the grace of God flowing through us. “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.” (1 Corinthians 1:27–29).*
- *One of the striking differences between the parable found in Matthew 20 and the parable found in Luke 19 is that in the first parable all the workers received exactly the same wages for their labour regardless of how long they laboured, while in the second parable the reward the servants received was directly proportional to how fruitful each had been.*
- *There are many Scriptures that point out a direct correlation between our fruitfulness and the rewards we will receive. “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.” (Matthew 16:27). “Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.” (2 John 1:8).*
- *The parable in Matthew 20 seems to contradict the principle that we see throughout the Bible that we will be rewarded in proportion to how faithful and fruitful we have been. “and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a*

reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Corinthians 3:13b–15).

- *As we study the parable in Matthew 20 we will explore why in this parable all the workers received identical wages regardless of how long they worked. We will also study the significance of this parable and how to apply these spiritual principles to our lives.*

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

- *A denarius represented a fair amount for a day's wages. So at the beginning of the day when the landowner hired the first group of labourers, what he offered them and what they accepted was reasonable and fair.*

³And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

⁴and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went.

- *A standard workday began at 6:00 AM, but in this parable the landowner was still in need of additional workers to labour in his vineyard and so he went out at 9:00 AM to hire additional workers. However, in contrast to the first group of workers who were hired, there was no predetermined amount for them to be paid. They were totally at the mercy of the landowner's trustworthiness and generosity. "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went."*
- *Those who were unemployed during the morning are described as "standing idle" in the marketplace. In other words they were simply wasting the day. The Greek word that is translated for "idle" means "careless, without thought, lazy, indifferent, useless," so they were labourers without purpose who were accomplishing nothing.*
- *The analogy of the unemployed workers who were standing idly by could be compared to our lives before we received Christ. Up to that point in time our lives had no eternal purpose and all that we would accomplish would simply be forgotten and perish. We were simply living purposeless lives, living only for the temporal pleasures and fleeting successes of this life. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" (1 Corinthians 15:32).*

- *However, when we heard and understood the Gospel, we not only recognized our lost and hopeless state and our need for salvation, but we also realized the vanity and emptiness of the life we had been living.*
- *Once we received Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour not only did we receive salvation but we also received a heavenly calling and purpose for our earthly lives that would impact our lives and the lives of those around us for eternity.*

⁵Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.

- *As the day continued the landowner was still in need of labourers to work in his vineyard so at noon and again at three in the afternoon he went back to the marketplace and hired additional workers. Again the workers were not given a set wage for their labour, but simply trusted in the generosity and fairness of the landowner.*
- *Another reason the workers agreed to work for the landowner without a set wage was that they realized the day was quickly passing and other employment opportunities were either very slim or nonexistent. This opportunity might never be available again. This could be compared to unbelievers who later in life, finally begin to understand the Gospel and realize they have been wasting their lives and respond to Christ and surrender their lives to Him. They recognize that without Christ their lives are headed for a dead end.*

⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day?’

⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.’

- *Surprisingly, the landowner went down to the marketplace at five in the afternoon and still found labourers who had wasted almost the entire day because they had failed to find employment. Although there was only one hour left in the work day, the landowner hired them. This exemplifies the landowner’s mercy and generosity even to those who had lost and wasted most of the opportunities of the day.*
- *The example of the landowner hiring workers even in the eleventh hour is an encouragement to unbelievers, who in their old age, in the eleventh hour of their lives, can be assured that Jesus is still calling them to Himself in order to save them and “employ them to labour in His vineyard.”*

- *Even a man on his deathbed can receive Christ and testify to the saving power of Jesus to those around him in the last moments of his life.*
- *The thief on the cross not only put his faith in Christ but also testified to the other thief that Jesus was righteous and that he had put his faith in Jesus to save him. In fact, his testimony continues to be proclaimed today. His words are recorded in the Scriptures to testify for all time and to all people the wonderful mercy and grace of God who saves all who call upon the name of Jesus, even those who after a lifetime of rejecting Him respond to Him at the eleventh hour of their lives!*

⁸“So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.’

⁹And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius.

- *Amazingly the ones who laboured only for one hour received a full day’s wage of one denarius. In fact all those who only worked a partial day starting with those who were hired at nine in the morning, noon, or three in the afternoon all received a full day’s wage of one denarius.*
- *Obviously, they would have been both surprised and overjoyed at the landowner’s generosity toward them.*

¹⁰But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.

- *The ones who had worked the entire day of twelve hours also received one denarius. However, instead of rejoicing at the landowner’s generosity toward the ones who received more than they deserved, they felt cheated. They thought they deserved to be paid more than a day’s wages although they had only worked for one day.*

¹¹And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner,

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

- *Although the landowner paid them exactly what they had both agreed to, the source of their discontentment was that those who worked fewer hours received the same wage they received.*

- *On the surface their reasoning may seem sound. ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.’*
- *The workers who worked the entire day described how hard they had worked, “us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.” They tried to paint the landowner as the one who was unfair and unreasonable.*

¹³But he answered one of them and said, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’

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

¹⁵Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?’

- *Although they had spoken to him rudely, the landowner’s response was gracious and he addressed them as “friends.” However, the landowner clearly pointed out that he had neither wronged nor cheated them. ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’*
- *The landowner then clearly pointed out to the disgruntled workers that he had not wronged them, and he was fully within his rights to do as he wished with his own possessions. “I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?”*
- *However, the source of their complaint was not found in some fault with the landowner but something deep within their own hearts. “Or is your eye evil because I am good?” Their envy, selfishness, and lack of empathy towards others were the real cause of their discontentment. It was the landowner’s generosity and goodness which actually exposed what was in their hearts.*
- *Their envy and selfishness reflected a self-righteous attitude of superiority to those who worked fewer hours. They had a “holier than thou” attitude towards those whom they deemed less worthy than themselves. “You made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.”*
- *The selfish and self-centered condition of the disgruntled labourers is contrasted by the response of the other workers. Even those who had begun work at nine in the morning did not begrudge those labourers who had worked for only one hour. All the workers who had worked for only part of the day recognized that what they had received was more than they deserved and that it reflected the landowner’s generosity and not their own merit.*

- *When light encounters darkness, attitudes hidden by the darkness are exposed, just as the goodness and righteousness of God reveals our heart attitudes, whether good or bad.*
- *The landowner's response to the disgruntled workers was not to take the denarius they had received from them, nor to argue with them but to allow them to choose the way they wanted to proceed. "Take what is yours and go your way." Although their attitude toward the other workers and even toward the landowner was disrespectful to say the least, they did not lose the denarius the landowner had given them!*
- *They were free to hold on to their selfish way of thinking or allow the landowner's generosity to impact them producing within them a change of heart for the better.*
- *The disgruntled labourers could choose to listen to the words of the landowner. They could acknowledge both his generosity and their selfish response, repent and have a change of heart and a change of mind. The choice was theirs and the reason the landowner said, "Take what is yours and go your way." They could receive his words as a rebuke or an opportunity. The choice was theirs.*
- *While studying this parable we can understand the warning that we must guard our hearts from self-righteousness, pride, jealousy, and selfishness. We must learn to rejoice when God blesses and prospers other believers in their ministries and their lives. "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it." (1 Corinthians 12:26).*
- *When God blesses others it has at least a twofold purpose:*
- *God wants to pour out His blessings on His children because He is a loving and generous Father.*
- *God wants to test the hearts of some of His other children to expose any pride, selfishness, sense of entitlement, or envy that may be present, so they can confess their sins, repent, and be forgiven, cleansed, and set free.*
- *However, this still does not answer the question of why they were all paid the same if they all laboured for different lengths of time.*
- *For us to appreciate why all the workers received the same wage of one denarius we must understand that the wage in this parable is not a reflection of how hard they worked but their willingness to respond to the landowner's call*

to come and work for him. They were all paid because they all answered his call and came to work for him.

- *This parable is not about rewards but about salvation—justification. Justification is about imputed righteousness, based solely on putting one’s faith in Jesus Christ and all that He has done for us at Calvary through His suffering, death, and resurrection. Justification means one has been saved from the penalty of sin, which is eternity in Hell, and one’s eternal destination is now heaven.*
- *The landowner called each one of the labourers to himself not because they were worthy but because he was gracious. Jesus calls each one of us to Himself so that He can save us. “Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.” (2 Timothy 1:9).*
- *Whether one receives Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour at a young age and serves Him their entire life or one repents and receives Him on their deathbed they are all equally saved. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9).*
- *However, some believers who have not fully grasped that we are all sinners saved by grace alone and not by any works of righteousness that we have done may feel God is not fair to save everyone who calls on Him no matter how long they have resisted Him, how greatly they have sinned, or how many years of their lives they have wasted. They think better of themselves and less of others, and even less of God!*
- *When Christians are self-righteous and self-centered they may resent those who after committing terrible atrocities finally recognized their sinful condition and turned to Christ and are joyfully received into the family of God. They may even complain against God. “You made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.”*
- *In reality there is nothing that any of us could possibly do to earn our salvation. We are saved by grace and not by any works of righteousness that we have performed. “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:4-6).*
- *In this parable, the pay does not represent a reward for how fruitfully they laboured, nor for how many hours they worked. The pay (their salvation) represents their response to the landowner’s call for them to come into his*

- employment. That is why there is no mention in this parable of how much each of the labourers had accomplished or how much fruit their labour produced.*
- *Our salvation is not dependent on the age at which we received Jesus Christ nor on how much we did for Him. The important thing is that we responded to His calling, repented, and put our faith in Him as our Lord and Saviour. We are all equally saved and have a place in heaven simply because we responded to the call of salvation.*
 - *All who respond to God's invitation to put their faith in Jesus Christ will be saved and receive their "denarius!"*
 - *After reviewing this parable and understanding that its central theme is salvation, it still begs one question. "What advantage or purpose is there for those who have laboured longer and more diligently in the Lord's vineyard if we all receive 'one denarius'?"*
 - *Some Christians have even tried to use this parable as an excuse to continue living selfish and lukewarm lives, "What advantage is there for a Christian to spend their lives diligently serving God?" This attitude was echoed by the backslidden Israelites, "You have said, 'It's pointless to serve God. What do we gain if we meet his standards or if we walk around feeling sorry for what we've done?'" (Malachi 3:14, GW).*
 - *The reason some may have the misconception that this parable teaches that our work for the Lord, whether much or little, holds no significance for us, is because they have failed to recognize some subtle but important clues hidden in it.*
 - *Paul exhorted the Corinthian church not to allow such a mindset to befall them. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:58).*
 - *First, those who laboured throughout the day and those who worked only one hour did not accomplish equal amounts of work, nor did they benefit the landowner equally.*
 - *If all the workers had only laboured one hour the harvest would have been significantly smaller resulting in a great loss for the landowner. Jesus Himself even said, "Then He said to them, 'The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.'" (Luke 10:2). Our first task as labourers in God's vineyard is prayer. Without prayer the harvest of souls will be lacking. Our prayers matter greatly!!*
 - *I came to faith in Christ not only because people witnessed to me but because people prayed for me!*

- *Our willingness to trust God, serve Him, and dedicate our lives to work in His vineyard matters greatly to God. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10).*
- *Even though our part in God’s work is small and God’s part is huge, it does not mean that our part is insignificant. If we do not pray, and witness and live a godly life then the Gospel will not go forth. We need to be motivated by love not only for the lost but also our love for God whose heart is moved for the lost and the suffering. Remember that we, as believers in Christ, are His Body on this earth. He has entrusted us to lead others to Him.*
- *Second, just because those who were hired at the break of day exhibited some ungodly attitudes does not mean serving God from a young age is not a wonderful thing to do. However, it does serve as a warning for those who receive Christ when they are young, and especially in a Christian family, not to take for granted the wonderful grace filled salvation they have received. It is too easy to grow complacent and forget what life would be like if Jesus Christ had never died for our sin.*
- *We need to maintain our first love and to remember to “Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing.” (Psalm 100:2). If we do not serve God with a heart of love, joy, and thanksgiving, then our service to Him will not be acceptable. We will be disappointed when we realize that we will not hear this commendation from our Lord: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.’ (Matthew 25:21).*
- *Third, it is important to recognize that it is an amazing and wonderful privilege to be called by the Lord to work in His vineyard in spite of our failures. “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.” (1 Timothy 1:12–13).*
- *There were at least five benefits for those who laboured longer for the landowner in comparison to those who laboured for only one hour or who laboured less diligently:*
 - *They would have grown stronger physically.*
 - *They would have developed character and perseverance.*
 - *They would have produced a bountiful crop.*
 - *They would have blessed their master by their fruitful labours.*

- *They would have received a reward beyond just the wages for their work.*
- *Therefore we can see that even though all the workers received the same pay of one denarius—salvation—the benefits and rewards they received varied greatly depending upon their faithful service.*
- *Those who were hired at 9:00 AM also bore much of “the burden and the heat of the day,” but they did it joyfully with a thankful heart free from bitterness, envy, or a sense of entitlement. They appreciated being hired by the landowner and they wanted to bless their new master by labouring diligently in his vineyard. Their grateful attitude and their willingness to carry a burden and work in difficult conditions ensured them a great reward. They are an example of the type of labourers that Jesus will reward.*
- *These labourers benefitted the most from being in the landowner’s service. Their labour and motivation both pleased their master and produced a great harvest for him. In addition to their salvation, they would receive a great reward from their generous master.*
- *In Jesus’ teachings, and especially in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described many of the activities for which we will be rewarded.*
- *Beyond the wonderful grace gift of salvation referred to in this parable, God rewards us for our faithful service to Him and others. “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.” (Revelation 22:12).*
- *The reality for each one of us here is that we have all lost opportunities that the Lord had given us. There are times we resisted His Holy Spirit and lived our life our way. We may regret things we should have done and didn’t, and things that we have done that we wish we hadn’t.*
- *However, the wonderful news is that Jesus didn’t die simply to save us from Hell, but to give us abundant overflowing life and to manifest His redemptive work in our lives. He is resurrected from the dead so we can live victorious lives, overcome our past, and walk in freedom and fruitfulness.*
- *Jesus came to give us new opportunities to serve Him and live fruitful lives. He has promised to redeem our failures and lost years if we will allow Him. “So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, The crawling locust, The consuming locust, And the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, And praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; And My people shall never be put to shame.” (Joel 2:25-26).*
- *Jesus is calling each one of us to work in His vineyard. Don’t look at your past failures and regrets which will blind you to God’s purposes for your lives. Turn*

away from those distractions “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:2a).

- *“...lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” (John 4:35). Jesus is still looking for workers to labour in His vineyard!*
- *It’s never too late for a fresh start. We can’t change yesterday, but we can change today. Today can be a new beginning—and God does not despise small beginnings, He encourages them! (Zechariah 4:10).*
- *The parable in Matthew 20 ends with verse 16: “So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen.” God is calling us to come to Him so He can save us. He is also calling us to Him so that we can serve Him and live purposeful and fruitful lives. Jesus is calling and if we respond He will choose us. Others may have said we were last, but Jesus will put us first if we surrender to His Lordship.*