

Grumbling Workers in the Vineyard

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 September 2010

Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0:00] Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 19. In this passage, our Lord has just finished talking to the rich young man.

! Peter answered him, We have left everything to follow you.

What then will there be for us? And Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or fields, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much, and will inherit eternal life.

But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard, he agreed to pay them a denarius for the day, and sent them into his vineyard.

[1:31] About the third hour, he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went.

He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour, he went out and he found still others standing around. He asked them, Why have you been standing here all day long and doing nothing?

Because no one has hired us, they answered. He said to them, You also go and work in my vineyard. When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired, and going to the first.

The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came, and each received a denarius. So when they came, so when those who, so those who came who were hired first, they expected to receive more, but each one of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. These men who were hired last worked only one hour, they said, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

[2:44] But he answered one of them, Friend, I'm not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.

I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?

So the last will be first, and the first will be last. Well, tomorrow is Labor Day, a holiday that our country has set aside to honor the American worker for his contribution for our way of life in this nation.

Work is a large part of our lives. And so since that's the case, we're not surprised that our Lord, when teaching, would draw upon this aspect of our lives.

A very common aspect. There's unemployed people. There's an employer hiring. There's an agreed upon pay scale.

[3:51] There's payday. And all the rest. The common things of life. But the shocking thing in Jesus' story is the way that the employer paid the same wage for those who worked all day and for those who worked just one hour.

Can you imagine what would happen if such a thing was done today? It would cause riots and labor strikes and lawsuits and all sorts of complaints.

And if the employers continued such a practice, they would soon find that nobody would show up for work in the early morning hours. Everybody would sleep in and only show up about five o'clock at night, put in an hour's work, and get paid for the whole day.

Why work ten times longer when you can just work one hour and get the same pay? So I say that to say right up front that Jesus is not teaching here.

He's not teaching employers how to run their businesses. He's not teaching on labor management relations. It's not at all his purpose.

[5:01] Rather, he's teaching us something about God. How sovereign and how generous he is in grace. How his kingdom operates on the principle of grace and therefore is full of surprises.

For God is far more generous than we know and even than we sometimes like. For in hearing this story, we'll have our hearts exposed to see just how out of touch we can be sometimes with God's sovereign, generous grace as it exposes a legalistic spirit still found within.

Now the story is not at all complicated. Once upon a time, there was a landowner who had a vineyard and as you know, caring for a vineyard means that certain points of the season require a lot of labor where other times of the season there's nothing to be done.

This was one of those times when there's a lot of work to be done, perhaps even harvest. So it would not be uncommon for a vineyard owner to be out hiring men, day laborers who would hire themselves out for the day.

Not long-term employees but day laborers. So he goes out early in the morning, sunrise, six o'clock. When the topic on wages came up, they agreed upon one denarius for the day.

[6:31] That was the going rate for a day laborer. Around nine o'clock in the morning, he goes out again and found others hanging out in the marketplace with nothing to do.

You also go work in my vineyard and I'll pay you whatever is right. Here there's no agreed upon amount. They just trust that the man is good and will pay them what's fair.

They're happy to be working and so they go with just that promise. At twelve noon and again at three, he goes out and hires some more unemployed workers and he goes out one more time at five o'clock in the afternoon, just an hour before quitting time and he found still others standing around doing nothing because no one had hired them.

They must have given up hope for having any work that day and yet, surprise of surprise, he hires them and sends them into his vineyard.

Well, an hour later, evening arrives and that's time to settle up with the workers so the foreman is told to pay them their wages but he's given this surprising directive to begin with those who were hired last and to work your way back to those who were hired first.

[7:47] That's different and so the five o'clock crew are the first to be paid and the biggest surprise is that they're given a full denarius for only having worked one hour and so it goes with the others.

They're paid for the whole day far more than what they deserve and far more than they or anyone expected. And so it came time for the early bird crew and they've seen just how generous their boss, their landowner has been to every other worker.

So as they step forward to receive their wage, they fully expect to receive more but to their great surprise and disgust, they're just given one denarius too.

they're paid last and they're paid less than what they had come to expect and they wasted no time in letting their feelings to be known.

They at once began grumbling against the landowner. They only worked one hour and you've made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work in the heat of the day.

[9:02] We've done the heavier part of the work during the hottest part of the day. We surely deserve more than them. And the scary things, folks, is how much my heart resonates with that early bird crew.

It was about eight years ago and our whole family was in Heathrow Airport, London. We were coming home from a three-week vacation, had been with the Hawkins, they dropped us off at the airport and it was then that we heard the announcement that our flight had been way overbooked and they needed a lot of volunteers to fly out the next day.

Well, they were offering free overnight lodging and meals and \$300 per ticket. Now, there are six of us and my wife knows how to multiply by six and knows a good deal when she sees one and said, let's go for it.

And so we did. We went to the counter and sure enough, here's your vouchers for the free hotel and the meals and tomorrow when you come to fly out, you'll have \$300 each for each ticket.

But we were happy campers as we wheeled all of our luggage around the corner to the hotel attached to Heathrow and fine hotel, dining. Later, we got to talking to some other guests at the

hotel who were also on our same flight.

[10:29] They too had had the free meal and the free hotel, but they said that they had been promised \$500 per ticket. And suddenly I wasn't so happy with my \$300 per ticket.

And I found myself standing with this early bird crew of workers in Matthew chapter 20, envious and upset that others had received more generosity than I had.

And it was this very parable that the Lord used to come to mine and sort me out. Did you not agree to the \$300 per ticket, John?

Then take it and go and don't begrudge others receiving more generosity than yourself. notice what the landowner said to one of these who had worked all day.

Probably the spokesman and chief grumbler. Verse 13, friend, I am not being unfair to you. Now that was the charge. Not only were they unhappy with their wage, but they actually were accusing their employer of being unfair in his wage.

[11:51] And they're thinking ill of him. It's not fair what you've done. You have wronged us, is their implication of their grumbling.

So the landowner asked three questions that leave the man speechless. Question number one, didn't you agree to work for a denarius?

There's no denying it. Obviously so. And that's what he's given us. So there's no answer. But the expectation is yes. Yes.

So he says, take your pay and go home. It's what you agreed to. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Question number two, don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?

Again, the answer is undeniable. There is no answer given, but the answer is yes. I mean, you could give two denarii, or ten for that matter.

[12:56] It's your money, you can do with it whatever you want. That's your sovereign right.

Question number three, or are you envious because I am generous? Yes, yes, and yes.

Now here he puts his finger on their heart problem. Envy. Is anybody out there getting a better deal than I am? Anybody getting more generosity than I am?

I don't sit well with that. You see, we all appreciate generosity if it's delivered to our address. But when it's heaped on someone else, and especially the undeserving, we have trouble rejoicing in their good fortune.

and it's this self- interested envy that keeps us from rejoicing in the good done to others.

Now what becomes clear as this story that Jesus is telling goes on and on is the absolute generosity of this land owner. He's a large-hearted man.

[14:05] He's full of compassion for the needy. What comes out is that he's more concerned about the unemployed than he is for his own vineyard. Wherever and whenever he finds them, he hires them and puts them to work and pays them.

I mean, even an hour before quitting time. Now, realistically, how much work are you going to get out of a guy? Hiring him at five. I mean, by the time he makes his way to your vineyard, some of that time is already gone, that last hour.

And by the time he works out all the stiffness from leaning against the wall all day, more time is gone. He's just barely getting warmed up and the whistle blows. The day is over. This guy is clearly not hiring these men for what work he can get out of them.

He's hiring them that he might bless them, that he might do them good, unexpected good. What gracious generosity.

But these on the early bird crew cannot join in their joy, can they? They don't like that others have received such generosity that they have not received.

[15:15] And so, they're nailed to the wall, they're busted. Yes, you are envious because I am so generous.

And there's nothing for them to do but to take their money and go home. And with that, the story's over. And Jesus now delivers the punchline that will drive the lesson of the parable home to us. Verse 16, so, in summary, the last will be first and the first will be last. That's the way it will be in the kingdom of heaven on the day of settling accounts.

when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, the last will be first and the first will be last.

Now, Jesus spoke those words at least three different times in the Gospels. They're common words of our Savior. And each time He spoke them, they refer to surprises that are in store on the last day

of judgment.

[16:22] When people who will have been thought of as being first will be found to be last and people who were thought of to be last will actually be found to be first. Surprises.

Great surprises. I mean, who would have thought that these Johnny-come-lately guys at five would be paid the same amount as these early bird workers?

There's a double surprise that they are paid for a whole day when they've worked for one hour and that those who worked all day are only paid the same as those who worked for an hour.

Surprise. Surprise. College football is underway. Let's suppose, for supposition's sake, that Ohio State goes all year without losing and Indiana University wins their usual two games.

What if at the end of the season the BCS standings have IU as number one rank and OSU dead last.

[17:35] What surprise and what grumbling there would be. It's that kind of surprise. The last is found in first place and those in first are found in last place.

That's what Jesus is talking about. Those kinds of surprises are coming in the day of judgment because the kingdom of heaven operates on laws that are out of step with this world's laws.

The value system of the kingdom of God turns this world's value system upside down. the principle of grace upsets the whole apple cart of what men expect and it ensures that there will be many surprises in store.

And it's with such certainty that Jesus just announces the last will be first, the first will be last. And we wonder how can he speak with such certainty? Well he's the judge of that last day you see. He's the one who will be there. And so he sees people as they really are. He does not judge as man judges. For man looks on the outward appearance and that's all the further he can see.

[19:00] But he looks on the heart. And there are surprises of grace awaiting us. Let me give you some examples. We're sitting with Jesus across from the offering box at the temple and people are filing by and putting in their offerings and many rich people are dumping in.

It says throwing in large amounts. And everybody is saying wow those guys are going to be first when it comes to handing out rewards for giving in the day of judgment.

And a poor widow shuffles by and puts two tiny coins worth only a fraction of a penny into the offering box and no one seems to notice.

Jesus says she put in more than all the rest. Since they gave out of their wealth but she out of her poverty put in everything all that she had to live on.

You see Jesus is measuring by a different standard than the world. He measures by what we have left after we've given. And so the last will be first in that day.

[20:19] Or that woman at Bethany. There she is. She comes in off the street and Jesus is reclining at the table. And she breaks the alabaster jar of very expensive perfume and dumps it on him.

Anoints him. And the disciples who see only the outward appearance get on her case and say you're wasting good money.

Why didn't you sell it and give it to the poor? And Jesus says oh no I see the heart and I have a different standard than the standard of this world.

She's done a beautiful thing to me. And therefore what she has done will be told wherever this gospel is proclaimed. And so the last will be first.

Jesus does not see as man sees. The judge judges on different standards. Luke 16 18 what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.

[21:25] He was speaking of the Pharisees who loved money and justified themselves and clung to their own righteousness and looked down their noses on everyone else. And all men thought the Pharisees are most holy.

Surely they will be first in the day of judgment. I mean look how much they give to the needy. Look how much they pray. Look how often they fast.

And Jesus says that's just what motivates those men. Wanting people to see them praying.

Wanting people to see them giving.

Wanting people to see them serving and fasting. For all they do in religion is to be seen and honored by men. So when they show up in the day of judgment to receive their great rewards for all their service to God.

What a surprise. When they will be seen to be last. The king will say they have already received their reward in full. They sought the reward of men's praise and they have it.

[22:28] And that's all they have. But you know there's a lot of praying and fasting and giving being done in secret. And nobody knows anything about and nobody's expecting these people to be in first place.

But in that day they will because your father who sees in secret will one day reward you openly.

Yes, these are some of the great surprises in that final day.

Think of the penitent thief. Maybe you knew him all your life. He was an immoral man. He was a criminal. He deserved the death penalty and that's what he was getting.

And you didn't happen to be at Golgotha that day when he breathed his last and got what he had coming. But you sure don't expect to see him in heaven. Not him.

Not after the way he's lived his whole life. But what you missed was that with his dying breaths he looked over and was given faith to see in the emaciated body of the man beside him that he was a king with a kingdom that was to come.

[23:41] And he said, have mercy on me when you come into your kingdom. Remember me.

Jesus said to this thief today you will be with me in paradise.

You missed that. You weren't there that day. So you come to the day of judgment and there he is standing on Jesus' right hand dressed in robes of righteousness sparkling like the sun and receiving the welcome into eternal life from Jesus Christ.

The last first last yes, this is the way it will be in the kingdom of God when Jesus settles accounts.

Well, what's your response to such generosity of God's grace? This is what the parable is getting at. How do you respond to that? You say, it's not fair.

That guy went on in sin all his life. He got to suck up all the pleasures of sin and then at the last eleventh hour he repents, believes on Christ and he gets heaven too.

[24:55] And he's just as justified as any apostle who served Christ all their life. He's just as adopted, he has just as much righteousness imputed to his account as anyone else, as the apostle Paul.

That's not fair. Is that your response? Do you rejoice in seeing such generosity of grace saving this man at the eleventh hour?

You see, God is like the landowner in the story. He's far more generous than we realize and even more generous than we sometimes like. Who's this parable aimed at?

Why is Jesus telling this story? Well, it's aimed at, as all the parables generally are saying to us, if the shoe fits, wear it.

So if it's you, then it's written for you. But it's written to detect and to judge and to rebuke a legalistic spirit in men.

[26:02] And this legalistic spirit shows itself in many ways. I didn't say it's aimed at the Pharisees for then we would breathe easily, wouldn't we?

This isn't told for me, it's told for them. No, it's spoken against that legalistic spirit, whether found in the Pharisee or in a Peter who says, what shall there be for us in that day?

And he needs to be careful. whether this legal spirit reigns in a Pharisee or remains in a Peter or you or me, that's why this parable is being told.

And so the lesson is very clearly don't be like the early bird crew. Don't you be like the first who in that day will be last. That much is clear, isn't it?

Don't be like those who think they deserve more for their work or secondly who are found grumbling over God's generous grace to the undeserving. Those are two expressions of this legal spirit.

[27:15] Let's look at them individually. Number one, they think they deserve more for their work. Verse 10 says they expected to receive more. Expected it. They've got a very calculating spirit about this business of serving God.

so much work for so much reward. They've agreed to these terms and they just turn in their receipts at the last day and receive the payment of eternal life and rewards.

They fail to see that in the kingdom of God all rewards are rewards of grace and not rewards of merit debt or of debt. We can never put God in our debt by what we do in the way we serve him, the way we obey him, the way we do anything for him.

First of all, all of our service is already owed to God. You already owe him the love of all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You owe him that. All the time, every day.

That's your duty. So doing that doesn't make him owe us anything. It's what we owe him. So according to Jesus, if you do everything that you're told to do, you should still say, we are unprofitable servants.

[28:34] We have only done what is our duty. Luke 17, 10. And then all of our works of service are shot through with shortcomings and failings.

Have you ever served the Lord with perfect motive? Have you ever served the Lord with all in your heart? Have you ever done one thing that you haven't been able to look back on after you've done it and said, you know, I could have done it better.

Should have done it with pure motive. Should have done it with greater self-interest. No, we don't put God in our debt by our service.

If he should reward any of our imperfect service, it will be grace. No one has a claim on God and his rewards. And Peter, he must not think that his sacrificial service earns him rewards.

He may receive rewards, but he must never think that he earns and merits rewards. All our abilities to serve, what are they? They're given to us.

[29:38] All the strength to serve, it's given. And any success is all of grace. So it's grace just to have a part in the work of the kingdom.

It's grace that he accepts any of our service and it's grace that he rewards anything that we've done for him. Thinking that our service merits reward or makes God owe us rewards reveals a legalistic spirit.

It's a denial of grace. And that's why this parable follows Jesus' discussion with the rich young ruler who just wanted to know, what do I have to do to get eternal life? Tell me what I got to do to earn this reward.

That's his mentality. And this parable ensues. He thinks heaven can be earned by enough religious obedience and service to God.

That drives a lot of what's going on in churches this morning. They're there because they think that so much work will earn them so much favor with God.

[30:41] It's a means to an end. But what is missing in this early bird crew of workers is the joy of working for such a generous landowner. It's the joy of working for him.

They have this mercenary spirit. They just work for the wages, not for the joy of the master. They complain about the hardness of the work. It comes through.

They're just putting up with this just to get the pay. That's all they're interested in. We've borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.

such a heavy burden serving you. That's their attitude. Does that sound familiar to any other parable Jesus told? Maybe the prodigal son, that elder brother who describes what it's like to work for his father, his generous father.

And he says, look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. You see, he's standing in line with the early bird workers complaining that he doesn't have more.

[31:52] I've worked harder. I've earned it. You owe it to me. Now pay me more than what you've given. Father says, I'm always with you.

You have me and you have everything I have. He had no joy in serving just because of who his father was. he rather slaves away to get rewards, to make himself earn heaven at last.

You know, to the man who has not yet tasted grace, the Christian life is nothing but a burden. The young person who has not yet been changed in their hearts, the Christian life, the commands of Jesus, they're like a ball and chain around their leg.

But to the men of grace, who have received this abundant generosity of God in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of all their sins, his service is perfect freedom.

And they find that his yoke is easy and that his burden is light and that his commandments are not burdensome at all. It's a joy to be working for the master.

[33:19] It's a privilege to have him. That's enough just to have him. Well, that's the first expression of the legal spirit.

It's this thinking we deserve more, but secondly, they grumble over God's generous grace to the undeserving. we've earned our denarius, they haven't earned theirs.

How can you be so gracious to them? They're bitter, aren't they? They're fine with their own denarius until others are the objects of his abounding grace.

Those who relate to God on the terms of merit will always begrudge those that he treats in grace. They'll always be unhappy about that. And that is the legal spirit that reigned in the hearts of scribes and Pharisees.

By their hard work and disciplined efforts to live a moral religious life, they thought they had earned eternal life and rewards from God. And so when they see Jesus welcoming tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners into the kingdom of God upon repentance and faith alone, they're ticked.

[34 : 29] You mean they get heaven when they've lived like that and I've worked all my life to keep these commands of God?

That's why Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son and that's why it's introduced in chapter 15 of Luke. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Jesus but the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

And so they refused to rejoice. When such grace is shown to the undeserving, they grumble instead. What's Jesus teaching those parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son?

That whenever one is found, what is there in heaven? There's rejoicing. Oh, heaven is rejoicing. But you guys are grumbling.

The very same act causes heaven to break out in celebration, causes you to break out in complaints and grouching. And so the elder brother of the prodigal son refuses to come in and celebrate, doesn't he?

[35 : 41] Because I've slaved away for so long and you never threw a party for me and my brother, he hasn't slaved away like I have and look at what you're throwing for him. And he's standing right beside that early bird crew in Matthew chapter 20 with a legal spirit that's envious because God is so generous in his grace.

Oh, when God's grace is shown to the undeserving, it's cause for joy, not jealousy. That's the way it is in heaven. It's joy. How is it in your heart? When the most undeserving gets grace, how is it in your heart?

Is there that celebration to the extent in which we sympathize with this early morning crew of workers? To that extent, we are completely out of step with the God of all grace, with the very principle of the kingdom of God that operates in grace.

And to read the gospels is to find that Jesus is often talking and taking aim at this legalistic spirit that begrudges grace to the undeserving, that thinks we deserve more for what we've done.

Why is that? Why do you suppose Jesus is constantly loading his gun and firing parables and instruction at this legalistic spirit? I'll tell you why. It's because we have it in our hearts.

[37 : 08] We're born with it. It's in our blood. And even after grace comes, it still remains in us. And if we don't watch against it, it will raise its ugly head.

And we will think God owes us more than what he's giving us. And we will think that God is not good for blessing with such grace others who are undeserving around us.

And the scary thing is seeing just how easy it is to fall into a legal spirit. We need this parable.

Whether you're a Pharisee or a Peter, you need this parable.

We need often and over and over to be reminded that nothing that we do makes God our debtor.

We don't deserve any reward from God.

Every reward he gives will be a reward of grace. Indeed, anything good in my life, whether here or in eternity, is grace.

[38 : 17] John Newton never served God faithfully for many, many years as a minister of the gospel, but he never thought that God owed him rewards for his service.

God was somehow indebted to him. He never forgot what he was, and so he never got over the fact that God had saved him. Amazing grace, he says, that saved a wretch like me.

And Newton speaks about the surprises that he expects to meet with in the day of heaven. When he comes to heaven, he expected to be surprised in three ways. Number one, to see some there I didn't expect to see.

Oh, she's there. Oh, the thief. Secondly, to not find there some I expected to find there.

Where's the pillar of the church? Where are the leaders of the religion of Israel? Where are these people we expected to find there? The third, to find myself there.

[39 : 22] That will be the greatest wonder, Newton says. It will be all of grace, surprising grace.

God should give me heaven when I deserved hell, and that for the sake of his son, who took my torments on Calvary, that I might know his blessing.

You see, he's the only one who ever deserved and earned and merited rewards by his perfect life. But here's a question for you. Why should I gain from his reward?

I cannot give an answer. But this I know with all my heart. His wounds have paid my ransom. His reward of eternal life and eternal blessing, and I share in that reward.

Grace. Grace. That's all it is. It's grace. They don't deserve it. And so all through the eons of time, through all the ages, you know what we will do as we see and enjoy the rewards that God gives to us as his people?

We will demonstrate, and we will show forth the incomparable riches of his grace. That he has shown such kindness to us in Jesus Christ. Have you tasted that grace?

[40:40] Come today and taste it. It's free. It's sovereign. It's abounding. Grace that is greater than all our sins. Let's pray. Our Father, we confess that we don't know but a very small part of how generous you are in grace.

Forgive us that ever we would deny your sovereign prerogative to dispense your grace as you please, when and how you please. Forgive us forever thinking that our works put you in our debt. Forever not rejoicing when we see another exalted with your generosity. Forgive all these sins and show us more of that grace that we've come to taste in Jesus Christ.

May it change us that we who have tasted grace might be gracious men and women to those undeserving around us. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.