

The Upside Down Kingdom Part 2: The Workers in the Vineyard

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You Cut, I Decide

Let us talk about 'fairness'. Now in my family I have two brothers. One of them is two and a half years younger and the other is seven years younger. Now despite the fact that I am the oldest, I also happen to be the shortest. I know, it is shocking. I was shocked too the day I discovered I would be the smallest brother. It was a sad day.

As you might imagine, my brothers and I could be very competitive. Well, 'could be' is an understatement. We were VERY competitive. This used to drive my parents crazy as we could start getting tense with each other over games, sports, what t.v. program to watch, and even over food.

Thankfully, my Dad is a genius and he instituted this brilliant rule in our house when it came to food. If there was ever one last cookie, or a single piece of Pizza, or something that each one of us was guaranteed to want a piece of, my Dad would deploy the, 'he cuts you decide' rule.

Basically what this meant was that one brother would be selected to divide the piece of pizza or slice of cake and then the other two brothers would get to select which piece they wanted. The person who cut the cake would always have to go last.

In theory this would mean that there would be three equally sized pieces of whatever food we were trying to share. In theory!

Mannnn, we became fantastic at devising all kinds of methods of trying to make sure that the cutter got the biggest piece. Cutting on angles, instead of three pieces, cutting 9, if it was pizza, cutting according to the special toppings anything to give an advantage to the person cutting. One of my brothers would intentionally take AAAAAGES cutting with the hope that we would become bored and disinterested with the cake. He hoped we would then go away and he could eat the whole thing on his own.

As I think back to this, I am a little embarrassed. What does this say about the brother who was the cutter? What about the brothers who sat and waited through all the silly behaviour and then did their own silly behaviour when it was their turn to cut. Shameful!

In hindsight, it is pretty silly but at the time. Man did it ever matter. Maybe this is only evident in my family, but MAN does 'fairness' matter between brothers. Wow!

This morning we are going into week 2 of our Upside Down Kingdom series. This month we are examining the lessons that are hidden in the Parable of Jesus Christ. In particular, our

goal is to examine how they give us a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven and to consider how we might be able to apply those lessons more deeply within our lives.

Today, let us turn to Matthew Chapter 20. We will start at verse one where we begin the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Matthew 20 1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

For the Kingdom of Heaven. Not all parables begin this way, but many do speak to this idea of the ‘Kingdom of Heaven.’ Many times when we think about the kingdom of heaven it can be tempting to think about heaven as a distant place that we get to go to when we die but I want to remind us that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the Lords prayer, he specifically says in Matthew 6:10;

your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

So, as we read this parable, let us be thinking about how Jesus is describing the kingdom of heaven but as something that can be built here on earth.

Now, as we read we encounter an ‘earthly’ situation. There is a landowner who needs to get some work done in his vineyard. The man is growing grapes, presumably to make wine and he needs some help to get the work done. So he goes out early to hire people to work his land.

You would think that if this man is running a big vineyard, he would have already hired staff. So it is a little strange that he is out in the morning getting people to work for him for the day. Why not hire people to be permanent staff? After all, if you are the landowner, it would save you from going down to the market each day to look for workers.

Actually, this is not so uncommon. Around the world there are many people who struggle to keep a job. Thankfully, for many of us here in this room, we have jobs we can rely on, we know today what we will do tomorrow and we can rely on our employers paying us fairly. Unfortunately, many around the world do not have this luxury. In many cities around the world, people who are known as ‘day labourers’ will go to labouring companies each morning in search for work. To do this though, they need to be registered with the company which means they would need all of the correct documentation. For those who do not have this, and it could be for many reasons, the situation becomes far more risky. Day labourers

who cannot register with a company, may still try to find work. In many cities around the world their might be a street corner or a certain neighbourhood where people who are looking for work might loiter and hope for an opportunity.

Employers who are looking for an extra hand for the day could contact a labour hire company, however, this could be more expensive than driving to the area and picking up some day labourers.

Unfortunately for the labourers, they are in a vulnerable position. The jobs are often dangerous or difficult and because they do not have the protection from a labouring company, they are vulnerable. They have to work hard to get paid, but what if the owner doesn't pay them? They might be in a country illegally, or they might be in debt. Day labourers are often a vulnerable group of people.

It is important for us to know that these workers are pretty vulnerable. In fact, they are vulnerable enough that there are some Old Testament instructions that are supposed to offer them protection;

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

14 Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether that worker is a fellow Israelite or a foreigner residing in one of your towns. 15 Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it. Otherwise they may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

Leviticus 19:13 New International Version

13 "Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.
"Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

This group of people must have been taken advantage enough that this situation needed to be addressed in the Old Testament. Let us see what happens next.

3 "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went.

Hmmm. It seems like there is more work to be done. The owner again goes back to the marketplace where the day labourers are standing and hires some more people. Perhaps he went out at 6 am the first time, now he is going back at 9am to see if more will work for him. Did the owner underestimate how much work he had for the day?

We continue:

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.

What is this guys deal? Why didn't he just hire them all at the same time? We don't know but it would seem like there is so much work to be done that he needs to hire more people.

6 About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

7 "Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

How much work does this landowner have!? He goes at 6am, 9am, now we learn he goes out at 12 noon, and then at 3pm? That is a lot of trips. And then... we discover that he is going back out again at 5pm? What is going on in this farm? And, who hires someone to work at 5pm? If they start at 6am, when are they going to stop? How long are these people going to work who were hired at 5?

At this point of the story, we need to pause. The conversation that takes place at 5 in the afternoon is one that needs some consideration.

Land Owner: Why are you standing around doing nothing?

Day Labourers: Because no one has hired us.

No why would these people not be hired? One might think, 'maybe they are lazy'. It is possible. What else could be going on?

You know when people are picking a sports team, they pick the most skilled, most athletic ones first. We already said that day labourers are a vulnerable group. Could it be that at 6am, the fittest were hired. Then again at 9am the next most capable people were hired, and this happened again at 12 and then 3.

By 5 o'clock, the only people who were left standing there are the outcasts. Maybe they foreigners, maybe they couldn't speak the language, maybe they were disabled, maybe they were addicted to alcohol, maybe they had horrendous tempers. Also, what is happening in the spirit of a person who gets up early hoping to work and watches as hour after hour other people get hired and they remain standing there. Are these people who the landowner is now talking to, are they the outcasts and the hopeless?

How might these people felt when they heard the land owner say;

You also go and work in my vineyard

Let us continue;

8 "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 on to the first.'

9 "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.

Ehhhhh, honto!? A denarius? A denarius is the equivalent of a full day's wages. The last get paid first, the ones who were hired at 5 get a full day's wages. They would have felt great!

10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

And who would blame them? They had been sweating it out under the hot sun the entire day, some as early as six in the morning. Surely a 'fair' land owner would pay them more, right?

This is obviously not a 'you cut they decide' situation.

Let us listen carefully to what they say.

12 'These 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.'

And you have made them equal to us. By paying us both the same, you have made us equal to us. Now they have a legitimate right to be upset. I think. I think I would have been upset, which is probably why I think they have a legitimate reason to be upset.

But the reason they give is very interesting. You have made us equal. Now if there is any legitimacy that the people who are selected at 5pm are the outcasts and the worst of the bunch, are the workers only upset at that they are not paid the same. Or are they angry that the landowner is making them all the same by paying them the same amount.

Are they offended because they thought they might be better than, or deserve more than the worst of the bunch?

I think this interaction here is what makes this parable so confronting. I think it is easy to swiftly read through this and agree that things are not fair. But, these little snippets of conversation give us an opportunity to paint the picture in more detail. This gives us a way to see the upside down kingdom of heaven.

We want things to be fair so we get what we deserve, and we want things to be 'fair' so that we can feel comfortable with having things that other people 'do not deserve'. This would be the human kingdom.

In contrast, this is how the land owner responds.

13 "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Bringing It Together

Now I have never been a day labourer, but I have signed up to labour hire companies when I have needed work. I have been a labourer. I have worked on construction sites in the hot Australian sun. I have done days where I have shovelled dirt from dawn till dusk needing 12 liters of water to stay hydrated and if I knew that someone who had worked half as hard as me, for half the time was getting paid the same amount. I would be angry.

But, more importantly, I have also been an outsider. I have been in many situations where I couldn't speak the language, where I have been picked last. In my youth people made fun of me for my name and teased me because of my bad skin. When working at a store I have been yelled at because I was a foreigner. The person swore at me and accused me of things I was not responsible for, because I was not from his country. I would hate for anyone to have to go through these experiences. I am sure many people have had it much worse, but those experiences left me empty, ashamed and hopeless.

In those moments I needed a landowner like what we have just read about.

The landowner sets a beautiful picture of what the upside down kingdom is like.

Firstly, there is a lot of work to be done.

But,

And we see a landowner constantly inviting people to be a part of the harvest. Who here has been thinking about whether God wants them to be a part of His ministry?

We see a landowner who goes to the workers, rather than waiting for them to come to him. Who here thinks that God doesn't see them, or want anything to do with them?

We see a landowner who reaches out, even at 5pm, to the people who are most in need. Who here is in a 'last hour' situation?

We see a landowner who honours his agreements and pay what he says he will. Who here has been taken advantage of by authority in the past?

We see a landowner who gives generously and makes sure all are taken care of. Who here is in need?

We see a landowner who will not back down to the comparisons and the justifications that people make that try to entitle them to more than others.

Who here has been a victim of injustice and then has been shamed for it?

16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

I don't know about you, but I have felt like a failure more times than I have felt like a success. I have been last more times than first. I am so grateful for Jesus's words here in the Parable

of the Workers in the Vineyard because it gives me such profound hope that God sees me and has a place for me.

The beautiful thing about this too, is now we get to choose what kind of kingdom we are going to build. What example are we going to follow? Are we going to compare our work to others and attempt to get more compensation for ourselves, or worse, less compensation for others? Are we going to do this in our workplace, in our schools, or, worse, in our churches?

Or, are we going to see the beautiful picture that Jesus shares in this parable and are we going to do likewise? Are we going to be lavish with our invitations and our generosity? Are we going to see those in need and treat them more than equally.

The God that loves us goes beyond expectations. Let us all go and do likewise.

Benediction

Jude 1:24-25

24 To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— **25** to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.