

Being born and brought up in Yorkshire, where we lived were all families that had to work hard for a living. Life was physically **hard** for my parents and people of their generation. And something that was said a **lot** in those days when I was growing up was “You don’t get owt for nowt!” Translating that for you, “You don’t get anything for nothing.” You don’t get **anything** for free, you don’t get anything **out** if you don’t put anything **in**. I’ll leave you to think about whether that’s **still** the expectation nowadays.

This morning I want us to look at a story that Jesus told about some people who got what they didn’t **deserve**. Let’s turn to the parable in Matthew 20.

Let me say straight away that this parable is **not** saying that we have to **earn** our way into heaven. It’s **not** saying that. The Bible’s very **clear** that it’s by **grace** we’re saved, we can only be made right with God through his **grace** and **mercy** as revealed in Jesus’ death on the cross, his death which paid for our sins, which we’ll think more **deeply** about a little later. We’ll see that this parable is more about the **landowner** than the workers.

Matthew, you’ll remember, was a tax collector who Jesus called to **follow** him. He walked and **talked** with Jesus; he heard what Jesus had to **say** as he spoke with the authority of **God**; he saw the miraculous **things** Jesus did. So here are actual words that Jesus – the Son of God spoke. How amazing is **that**? Does the timelessness of these words **excite** you? We’re reading the words of a first hand eye-witness, so we must take **note** of what’s recorded here.

In their Scriptures, the Old Testament as **we** now know them, the Jews were told to wait for a **Messiah**, God’s **Servant**, a **Saviour**, **King** of God’s Kingdom. They were expecting a **warrior** king, like the great king David. So Jesus wasn’t what they were expecting at **all**. He told parables – using familiar situations from Jewish life at that time, to describe the **unusual** nature of the kingdom of **God**, a kingdom which would turn their lives upside-**down**. It wasn’t what they expected; for **most** of them, it wasn’t what they **wanted**.

The words at the **end** of this parable are more or less the same as the words at the end of the **last** chapter, so they’re an indication of what the parable’s **about**: ‘*So the last will be first and the first will be last.*’ Strange words – but what do they **mean**?

They're an indication of the unexpected or unusual **nature** of the kingdom of God. And they come after Jesus has said in 19:23,24 that it's extremely hard for a **rich** man to come into the kingdom, a man the disciples thought would have been **certain** to enter heaven. And so the disciples ask in verse 25, '*Who then **can** be saved?*' Jesus says, in the kingdom of God, '*the last will be first and the first will be **last**.*'

So I want us to look at the usual and the **unusual** this morning. Firstly let's look at **the usual employment**.

The picture of the vineyard was very familiar to Jews; the Old Testament includes numerous references to God's people, Israel, being the vineyard. For example in Isaiah 5:7, he writes, '*The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel.*' So the Jews realised straight away that Jesus was talking about **them**. And they'll have known the **owner** of the vineyard was God himself. So Jesus tells a story about God and his people. Nothing unusual **there**.

The working **practises** described here were well-known too: the working day was dawn to sunset, and the way of **getting** a job was by standing at the market-place waiting for an employer to come with an offer of a job for the day would've been like going to the Job Centre. The pay of a denarius would have been a very **good** wage for a day's work, and being paid at the end of the day was normal, so they could afford an evening meal for themselves and their families. **All** very familiar. **All** normal. Nothing unusual here. Work and workers **all** very normal and what the listeners expect.

We've already said that Jesus is talking about **God** here as owner of the vineyard. What **about** the landowner? Well, we find he's **an unusual employer**. We need to think about **him**, because I think this parable's more about the **landowner** (the ESV calls him the master of a house) who owns the vineyard the workers are **in**. What about **him**?

This employer cares about the people in his vineyard. He cares about them **enough** to go personally to the market place to invite them **in**. **Normally** the landowner would send one of his **men** to hire workers. But **this** owner goes **personally** to invite people.

More than that he cares so much that he goes **repeatedly** to recruit people. He knows that as the day goes by, the people waiting in the market place will lose **hope** as another day without work, money and the possibility of buying a **meal**

for the night will be slipping by. He has **compassion**, he wants to invite them **all** in. He doesn't want **any** to be needy, if he can do anything to **avoid** it.

So the employer goes to the market-place repeatedly, whenever he wants, and calls the men **he** wants to come into his vineyard. **He** calls the shots, he's in **control**. Nobody tells him what he can do and how and when. He answers to **no-one**.

And don't we see something of **God** here? The Bible tells us that God's **continually** looking for those he can invite into his kingdom. We're told that God's '*compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*' He doesn't want **anyone** to be in need, he invites **all** to come to him. Some will **respond** to his call; others **won't**. But he doesn't want **any** to perish, Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3:9. He's **God**. He **knows** what we need – we need to be **saved**. Today he invites men, women and children to come into his kingdom, by recognising that Jesus died on the cross, to take away the punishment for our sin, so that the way can be **clear** for us to come into his kingdom.

But **more** than that, he's a God who comes to **us**, and calls us **individually** by name. **He** knows the times. **He** knows the places. He calls when the time and place are **right**. And he comes to **us**. That's what distinguishes Christianity from all **other** religions – we don't have to reach a certain achievement or perfection like in **other** religions. God comes and reaches down to **us**. That's why Easter Sunday, April 17th, 1976, about 7.30, on the balcony in a chapel in a village called Lanthwaite in the Yorkshire Dales is the most important time and place for me, because **that's** when God came and reached out and called **me** into his kingdom. **God**, almighty **God**, came and found **me**. He came and called me, because he had **mercy** and **compassion** on me. That's what God **does**. Have **you** heard his call? Have you **responded** to his call?

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:2, '*I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the time of salvation.*' That may be **today** for you. **Respond** to God's call. Turn to him and be saved, enter his kingdom.

God cares about people who're lost and needy – Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Jesus said, '*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*' Matthew 11:28. God has compassion on **all** he's made, he calls people to **come** into his kingdom.

The **employer** goes out at different times of day, and **God** calls people at different stages in their **lives** – some in their early years as **children**, some – like here with the landowner – at the 11th hour, or even on their **death-bed**. The **thief** on the cross next to Jesus, remember, as he hung there dying, asked Jesus to **remember** him when he came into his kingdom, and Jesus said *‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’* Luke 23:43.

But we must **not** take this to mean that we can put **off** our response to God’s call. God calls when the time is **right**, he answers to no-one. So it’s not **safe** to presume that we can put God off until our dying day, and **then** think we can respond – the call may not **come** that day. Bishop J.C. Ryle said, ‘One thief on the cross was saved, so that no-one should **despair**; but **only** one thief was saved so that we shouldn’t **presume**.’ *‘I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the time of salvation.’*

Usual employment, but an **unusual** employer.

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At the end of the day, in verse 8, the workers are called to receive their pay for the day. It was normal for the men who’d worked the **least** to receive their pay **first**. But that evening there was something **unusual** about the payment – we’ll come to that in a moment – but here we see the men’s usual **response** to what happened. **The workers’ usual response.**

[Re-read vv. 9-12]

The landowner pays the men who’d worked for just one hour exactly the **same** as the men who’d been slaving away all day in the boiling heat. And - lets face it - you’d probably **agree** with the full-day workers that that was very **unfair**. Today there’s no **way** that any employer in the **country** would ever get away with it. We’re up in **arms**, aren’t we at the slightest suggestion of unfairness. There’d be strikes, there’d be disruption, demonstrations, civil unrest. Those people listening to Jesus would have been **outraged** at this treatment of the workers, and to be honest, so are **we**, aren’t we?

We don’t like unfairness, do we? So we see these workers’ reaction as **normal**. A usual response to being treated unfairly. We feel – like them – **aggrieved** when we’re treated unfairly, whether it’s at work or at home or by our friends. We don’t like to see that others are being treated more **favourably** than we are. And we’ve got to be very **careful** here, because such feelings reveal **pride**. We feel put **down**, don’t we? We don’t feel **happy** for those who’ve been treated more **favourably** – we feel **unhappy** that we’ve been put **down**. 4

Our **pride's** hurt. And pride's such a dangerous **thing** isn't it? Proverbs 29:23 tells us '*A man's pride brings him low.*' Envy so easily leads to hatred, doesn't it? All because we feel we've been treated unfairly. These men grumbled against the landowner. How **could** those who'd only worked an hour get paid the same as them who'd worked all **day**? And **we** feel they have a strong case.

In verse 13 the landowner replies: '*Friend,*' he begins. And alarm bells should now start ringing because of that word '**Friend**'. In **this** gospel Jesus only uses this word 'Friend' 3 times, and in each case the person being spoken to is in the **wrong**. In the parable of the king's wedding banquet, the king is speaking to a guest who thinks he can get in without being **clothed** correctly. The other time is when Judas comes with soldiers to **arrest** Jesus, and he says to Judas, '*Friend, do what you came for.*' So we **know** that the workers are going to turn out to be **wrong**.

The landowner explains why he **hadn't** been unfair on the first workers, because when he employed **them** he and they'd agreed that they'd be paid a denarius – a **good** day's wage – for their work. They'd **agreed** that amount, so the landowner had fulfilled **his** part of the deal by paying them what they'd **agreed**. His treatment of them **wasn't** unfair. It's what they'd **agreed**.

But this is where we see something **unusual** about the employer – **his unusual payment of the workers**. No **other** employer would have a system like this, I'm **sure** – we're not told what happened the **next** day, but I guess there'd be half of **Israel** knocking at his door to work in his vineyard!

The landowner pays those employed at the **11th** hour the **same** amount as those employed at the beginning of the day. Verse 14: '*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**?*' He says. 'It's **my** money, I have the **right** to be as generous as I **want** with it, don't I?' The owner shows **agreed** generosity in keeping his deal with the **first** workers and he shows **uncalled** for generosity to the **rest** in paying them **all** the same amount. Even the **full**-day workers were getting a very good deal. What each **received** was through the **generosity** of the employer.

Remember, Jesus is talking about what the kingdom of **God** is like, the employer represents God. So what does it **tell** us about God?

Firstly it tells us he's **generous**. The payment is **unusual** in that it's **generous**. **More** generous than any expected. The **length** of their work had no bearing on what the workers were **paid** – the landowner paid them all the same amount, **increasingly** generous as the day went on. Paul praises God in his letter to the Ephesians, that he has *'blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.'* I don't know exactly what that **means** yet, but it sounds really **generous** to me! God's *'blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.'* God is a **generous** God. There are eternal **pleasures** at God's right hand.

It also tells us that God is **sovereign**. In other words he's in total control of **all** that he's created. That **doesn't** mean that he's responsible for all the horrible things that happen because of man's sinful rebellion in our world, the things that happen because we're following our own **desires** and **greed** rather than following **God's** way. But he **overrules**, and he **will** have his way. He's **sovereign** and answers to no-one. He does what he **wants**, because he's **God**. No-one can tell **him** what to do. So if he **wants** to shower with blessing, he **will**. If he **wants** to save, he **will**. If he **wants** to give eternal life, he **will**. God *'will have mercy on whom [he] will have mercy, and .. have compassion on whom [he] will have compassion.'* Exodus 33:19 tells us. That's **God's** decision, and we have no right to say he's **unfair**, because **none** of us deserve **any** of God's generosity. We're all reliant upon God's gracious generosity to enter the kingdom of God.

In his **sovereignty**, **God** chooses who he will call, when and where. The workers in the parable were unhappy that whoever the landowner called, he paid them the same amount. **Whoever** was called.

Which of Jesus' listeners would've complained? Well, the **Pharisees** would, because they were full of self-righteousness and hated the common people. The **Jews** would - they thought they **kept** the Law of God, **they** were God's own people and why should they share their inheritance with **non-Jews**? The disciples would, because they'd left **everything** to follow Jesus, why should there be a free welcome for those who at **this** stage were **enemies** of Christ? In fact pretty much everyone who was listening would've complained!

Remember perhaps the parable of the lost son in Luke 15? Remember his brother? The forgotten one who obeyed his father all his life. He was **totally** put out, wasn't he, because of the younger son's **welcome**. At the end of the parable, the **elder** son's **angry**, refusing to go in to the feast.

What about us? What about when the Lord calls someone into his kingdom, a **newcomer**. And they're so keen and quick to learn, and they want to share their experiences all the time, and they want to start leading meetings and start preaching. And all that, when **you've** been a loyal member of the church over **decades**. **You've** served the Lord **well**, and **here's** someone coming in and taking **over**. How do you **feel**? Happy that they're really progressing in their faith? Or deep down are you **jealous**, annoyed?

We can't become proud and self-righteous, because God exercises his **sovereignty** in calling people into the kingdom. Matthew's clear here that entry into the kingdom of God doesn't rely in any way on our **merits**, it depends **totally** on the undeserved favour of a **compassionate, generous and gracious** God. He accepts those who realise they'll **never** be good enough. Does that include **you**? It certainly includes **me**.

Thirdly, God's **gracious**. **Amazingly** gracious! The unusual payments to those who'd not completed a day's work show that man has **no** claim on God – the workers' **work** has no bearing on their payment. **Likewise** our entering into the kingdom relies in **no way** on what we've done or achieved. This is echoed in Ephesians 2:8-9: *'For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of **God** – not by works, so that **no-one** can boast.'*

There's no place for pride, envy, or hatred because no-one has the right to question God's generosity, or his sovereignty, or his grace. **No-one** has the right to question the way God treats the undeserving.

The landowner gave the workers what he saw they **needed**; **all** the workers – even those who were recruited at the 11th hour – **all** of them needed to feed themselves and their families. The owner **saw** that, and provided generously. God sees that all of us need **saving**, we all need to enter his **kingdom** if we're going to be saved from the enemies of our own sinfulness, the devil and death. So he's **generously, sovereignly and graciously** provided for that need. He's provided a **Saviour** in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Entry into the kingdom of God – we call it salvation – is when God exercises **free, unconditional** and sovereign **grace** in calling those who'll respond. Why some and not others? Why some now and some later? We don't **know**. But what we **do** know is that **whoever** believes that Jesus came, that he took the punishment **we** deserve for our sins and died on the cross, that he rose again

defeating death and the devil, and that he's now ruling in heaven until he comes again, whoever believes **these things will** be saved and enter the kingdom of God.

Whenever a person comes to believe these things – whether early in life, or a **second** before Jesus comes again – **all** will be fellow-heirs of an inheritance of eternal life and **glory** in heaven. These are the wonderful things God promises. **Equally** forgiven; **equally** accepted; **equal** citizens of heaven. A **day**-old faith is just as complete as 80 **year**-old faith. All those who know that their sins are forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus will enjoy **all** the riches of heaven along with Abraham, David, Peter, Paul and all the other believers down through millennia. **All** because we've known the call of an **unusually** compassionate, generous, sovereign, gracious God.

That's what this parable is about. Have **you** heard the call of this God? Have you **responded** to that call? If **not**, what's **stopping** you? **Talk** to someone about it. Don't let it go on. If you have responded, give all the thanks and praise to **God** that you're wonderfully **saved** and an heir of all the riches of heaven. There's no room for pride or contempt in the kingdom. Some who've served for years but with wrong motivations or feelings will be **last**. Those who know they have **nothing** to boast of will be **first**. We focus on what **God's** done for us and serve him with hearts of **thankfulness**.

And that's what we'll be doing in a few moments as we **remind** ourselves that God **loved** us, **gave** his son, who **died** that we might be **forgiven**.