As we continue with our series on “The Parables of Jesus” we are going to be studying “The Parable of The Workers In The Vineyard.”

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter twenty.

READ: MATTHEW 20:1-16

INTRODUCTION TO “THE PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD”

Like the two previous parables we have looked at, “The Parable of The Vineyard Workers” was prompted by a question.

Let’s back up and read: Matthew 19:27-30

Just before this scene, the Rich Young Ruler had come to Jesus wanting to know what good thing he needed to do to inherit eternal life. After Jesus told him to “go sell everything he had and give it to the poor” the Rich Young Ruler walked away sorrowful.

While the Rich Young Ruler had been unwilling to forsake all to follow Christ, Peter and the other disciples HAD been willing to FORSAKE ALL. So Peter asked Jesus, “What then will there be for us?”

Jesus’ reply was very encouraging, “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.”

Jesus had detected in Peter’s question a very dangerous attitude of the heart. Was Peter serving the LORD only for what He could get from Him? Were the disciples forsaking their “all” only because He had promised them a reward?

To counteract this “What am I going to get out of all this” attitude, Jesus told this “Parable of The Workers in The Vineyard.”

Like so many of our LORD’S stories, this Parable plunges us into daily life in ancient Palestine.

Day-laborers were a common fact of life in Jesus’ time. Because much of the work to be had in those days was in agriculture, men would gather at a regular spot in town hoping to be hired to do farm work of some sort.

One of the best times of the year for a DAY-LABORER to get hired out was when it was time to harvest the GRAPES in the vineyards. Well it just so happened the grapes ripened at the same time the “rainy season” was moving in on Palestine, so time was of the essence. The grapes needed to be harvested quickly or the Vineyard owner would suffer great losses. This meant there was plenty of work to be had for those who were willing to work.

Jesus begins the parable this way: “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in His vineyard.”

Now picture the scene here. All these “day-laborers” have gathered at the regular meeting place in town. It is around 6:00 o’clock in the morning, which was about the time the typical workday began in ancient Palestine. The work day usually ended around 6:00 p.m.

After agreeing to pay the hired workers one denarius, which was about .25 cents for 12 hours of labor, the Vineyard owner sent them out to work.

Verse 3 tells us that about the “third hour” which is 9:00 A.M.
The Vineyard owner went back to the “meeting place” in town and found some men standing around doing nothing. He hired them to go work in His vineyard, but notice He didn’t agree on a “set wage” as He had done with the first workers. He simply agreed to pay them “whatever is RIGHT.”

Verse 5 tells us that the Vineyard owner went back to the “meeting place” about the sixth hour or NOON and again at the ninth hour, which was 3:00 P.M. and hired more workers.

Verse 6 tells us the Vineyard owner went back to the “meeting place” at the “eleventh hour” or 5:00 p.m. to hire some more workers to go work in His vineyard.

Now I want to draw your attention to something. The first workers who were hired “early in the morning” would not go to work until they knew how much they would be paid. But the workers who were hired at 9:00 A.M. ........NOON........3:00 P.M. and .....5:00 P.M. all agreed to work with no contract. They went to work on a “good faith” agreement that the Vineyard Owner would be a fair and just man and pay them whatever was right.

Well at the end of the day the time came for the Vineyard owner to pay each man. I want you to notice He paid them in reverse order, starting with the last workers hired.

When the workers who were hired at 6:00 o’clock that morning saw that the workers who were hired at 5:00 p.m. were paid one denarius they got all excited thinking, “If he paid them .25 cents for working one hour, he’s probably going to pay us $3.00 for working 12 hours.

But when they saw every man got paid the same exact thing regardless of how long they worked, their excitement turned to anger. In the end, those who were hired first that day had nothing to complain about because they were paid the exact amount they were promised.

It should come as no great surprise that commentators have given a variety of explanations as to the meaning of this difficult parable.

For the remainder of our time let’s consider the two most common interpretations.

First let’s consider.............
I. What We Would Like For This Parable to Mean

1. What many people would like this parable to mean the God calls men to SALVATION at different AGES in LIFE, even when a man is on his “death bed.”

2. Those who believe this is what Jesus is teaching in this parable believe........

   - The Vineyard owner is GOD.
   - The “Market-Place” is the WORLD.
   - The “Vineyard” is the CHURCH.
   - The “Workers” are all SERVANTS in the Lord’s Church.
   - And the “hours of the day” represents the various STAGES in life when men hear and respond to the Lord’s call to SALVATION.

      - The “first hour” = CHILDHOOD
      - The “third hour” = PRE-TEEN or TEENAGE years.
      - The “sixth hour” = early to middle age ADULTHOOD.
      - The “ninth hour” = the ELDERLY years.
      - The “eleventh hour” = just before one DIES.

   - The “denarius” = SALVATION

3. While this interpretation may give us great comfort, there are two issues that can’t be overlooked.

   (A) If this parable is about SALVATION this interpretation is teaching SALVATION is by WORKS. Each man “worked” and was paid.

      Well we know salvation is not by works, but by the grace of God.

      Remember Paul’s familiar words in Ephesians 2:8,9........
“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no man can boast.”

(B) Also if this parable is about SALVATION how do we explain the DISCONTENT of the workers? You see, being “paid” at the end of the day would have to refer to the after-life once our WORK on earth is done.

Does it seem reasonable to you that those of us who accepted Christ early in life and worked faithfully for the LORD our whole life are going to “gripe and complain” because there will be some people in heaven who accepted Christ in “the eleventh hour?”

4. You see, while it is true that one may accept Jesus Christ at any age of life, that is not what this parable is about.

Well, let’s consider..............

II. What This Parable Likely Does Mean

1. A more likely interpretation of what Jesus meant by this parable is that it is talking about the calling of JEWS and GENTILES.

2. God’s ancient people, the JEWS were the first to be called.

3. The various “hours” represents God’s call through various periods of HISTORY.
Those who hold to this interpretation break the “hours” down like this:

- The “first hour” = From Adam to Noah.
- The “third hour” = From Noah to Abraham.
- The “sixth hour” = From Abraham to Moses.
- The “ninth hour” = From Moses to the coming of Christ.
- The “eleventh hour” = From the coming of Christ to the end of the world.

4. While it is probably best to forego any definite explanation of the “hours” and “workers” one thing does seem certain. The first workers called were the Jews. Under the “Old Covenant” of “works” they were rewarded for their faithful service to God.

5. And what about “the other workers” who were not paid a “stipulated wage?” They would be the Gentiles who were included in salvation by the grace of God, the owner of the Vineyard.

6. This interpretation would explain the “grumbling” of the “first workers.” The Jews (first workers) strongly resented the Gentiles (other workers) being included in God’s plan.

7. This interpretation would also explain what Jesus meant when He said, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

We Gentiles were the last to be called, but we shall be the first to go be with the Lord.
when He comes to get His Church.

The Jews, though called first, will be the last to be with the Lord, because of their disbelief.

**CONCLUSION**

What practical lesson does this parable teach us? I believe it teaches us we must all faithfully serve the Lord and continue to do the work He has called us to do until our life is over or the Lord comes to get us.

I believe it teaches us not to focus on “who gets what” or “who does what” in the Lord’s kingdom, but rather to trust that the LORD is faithful and true and will rightly reward each of us in the end.