

## Fair Labor Practices

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Matthew

This parable is unique to Matthew's Gospel. The owner of a vineyard hires day laborers at various times throughout the day. The ones hired at six o'clock in the morning put in a full day's work. Those hired at five o'clock put in only one hour of work. But the owner pays everyone a full day's wage (a denarius). He goes out of his way to make sure that everyone knows that all are paid the same in spite of the different number of hours worked. Not surprisingly, those hired first complain that they worked longer but earned no more money than those who started late in the day. "But the owner replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?... Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:13, 15-16).

Unlike the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-9 and 18-23, Jesus does not give us an explicit interpretation. As a result, scholars have offered many interpretations. Because the people in the story are laborers and managers, some assume it is about work. In that case, it seems to say, Don't compare your pay to others, or, Don't be dissatisfied if others get paid more or work less than you do in a similar job. It could be argued that these are good practices for workers. If you earn a decent wage, why make

yourself miserable because others have it even better? But this interpretation of the parable can also be used to justify unfair or abusive labor practices. Some workers may receive lower wages for unfair reasons, such as race or sex or immigrant status. Does Jesus mean that we should be content when we or other workers are treated unfairly?

Moreover, paying people the same regardless of how much work they do is a questionable business practice. Wouldn't it give a strong incentive to all workers to show up at five o'clock in the afternoon the next day? And what about making everyone's pay public? It does reduce the scope for intrigue. But is it a good idea to force those working longer hours to watch while those who worked only one hour are paid an identical wage? It seems calculated to cause labor strife. Pay for nonperformance, to take the parable literally, doesn't seem to be a recipe for business success. Can it really be that Jesus advocates this pay practice?

Perhaps the parable is not really about work. The context is that Jesus is giving surprising examples of those who belong to God's kingdom: for example, children (in Matthew 19:14) who legally don't even own themselves. In Matthew 19:23-26 Jesus is clear that the kingdom does not belong to the rich, or at least not to very many of them. It belongs to those who follow him, in particular if they suffer loss. "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matthew 19:30). The present parable is followed immediately by another ending with the same words, "the first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matthew 20:16). This suggests that

the story is a continuation of the discussion about those to whom the kingdom belongs. Entry into God's kingdom is not gained by our work or action, but by the generosity of God.

Once we understand the parable to be about God's generosity in the kingdom of heaven, we may still ask how it applies to work. If you are being paid fairly, the advice about being content with your wage may stand. If another worker receives an unexpected benefit, wouldn't it be graceful to rejoice, rather than grumble?

But there is also a broader application. The owner in the parable pays all the workers enough to support their families. The social situation in Jesus' day was that many small farmers were being forced off their land because of debt they incurred to pay Roman taxes. This violated the God of Israel's command in Leviticus 25:8-13 that land could not be taken away from the people who work it, but of course this was of no concern to the Romans. Consequently, large pools of unemployed men gathered each morning, hoping to be hired for the day. They are the displaced, unemployed, and underemployed workers of their day. Those still waiting at five o'clock have little chance of earning enough to buy food for their families that day. Yet the vineyard owner pays even them a full day's wage.

If the vineyard owner represents God, this is a powerful message that in God's kingdom, displaced and unemployed workers find work that meets their needs and the needs of those who depend on them. We have already seen Jesus saying that, "laborers deserve their food" (Matthew 10:10). This

does not necessarily mean that earthly employers have a responsibility for meeting all the needs of their employees. Earthly employers are not God. Rather, the parable is a message of hope to everyone struggling to find adequate employment. In God's kingdom, we will all find work that meets our needs. The parable is also a challenge to those who have a hand in shaping the structures of work in today's society. Can Christians do anything to advance this aspect of God's kingdom right now?