

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the workers in the vineyard** in Matthew 20:1-16. This is a parable concerning **REWARDS IN GOD'S KINGDOM**. Please read Matthew 20:1-16 by yourself, or take turns in the group to read a few verses each.

(S) Matthew 20:1-15 says, "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. 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 found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long 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 on to the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those 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.' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am 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?'"

(T) **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to explain the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable.

The landowner or literally "a house-lord" is probably an owner of an estate, which consists of a homestead and a large vineyard.

(S) The hired workers. During the harvest season, workers were usually hired on a daily basis. They congregated on the market place, where employers came to hire them. A full working day consisted of twelve working hours from sunrise to sunset. At the end of each day, they were paid their wages (Lev 19:13).

(T) The agreement. The first workers agreed with the landowner to work for one denarius. The later workers could not make such an agreement, because they only worked for part of the day. However, the owner promised them that he would give to them what is right.

(S) The payment of wages. At the end of a twelve hour working day, workers usually received one denarius. In this story the first workers received what they had agreed to work for. However, this landowner did much more than the workers expected: He began by paying the last workers first. And he paid the last workers the same amount as the first workers!

(T) **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

The setting of the parable is extended and contained in Matthew 19:16-30. Two things show us what the setting of this parable is: the word "for" shows that it is connected with the foregoing, and the conclusion of the parable is the same as the conclusion of the foregoing passage, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

(S) First. The danger of not entering God's kingdom. Matthew 19:16-26 describes a young man, who was very wealthy, but who also realised that he had not yet attained eternal life or salvation. He was searching for it in the wrong way. He thought that he should attain salvation through doing the works of the law (Mt 19:16,20). Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me." Jesus did not ask the rich young man to gain salvation by doing a good work! He put the rich young man to *the test of complete trust expressed in obedience to him*. Without complete trust in Jesus Christ, expressed in self-surrender and obedience, this rich young man could not be expected to go and sell everything he had. Jesus knew that his heart was bound to his wealth. If this rich young man wanted to be *mature* and *perfect*, he should put his complete trust in Jesus Christ and do what Christ said. In his case the test was to go and sell his possessions that stood

in his way to become a disciple of Jesus. This test was not put to other rich people like Job, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph in the Old Testament, or Zacchaeus and Joseph of Arimathea in the New Testament. Also they were only saved by faith (Gen 15:6).

(T) Second. The difficulty of entering God's kingdom. The rich young man chose to keep his wealth and possessions and turned away from Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter God's kingdom". Jesus meant literally what he said and declared that it is *absolutely impossible* for a rich man to work or worm his way into God's kingdom! Wealth, possessions, money and the things that go with this, namely, success, power and fame have such a powerful hold on the heart, mind and life of natural people that *they cannot save themselves out of it!* These things bewitch the rich, powerful and famous people, and prevent them from obtaining the attitude needed to enter into God's kingdom (1 Tim 6:9-10). Jesus spoke in absolute terms to impress on his disciples' mind that salvation is from the beginning to the end not a human achievement. Christ's disciples were shocked and asked, "Who then can be saved?" They probably reasoned that also the poor want to become rich and therefore cannot enter God's kingdom. Jesus answered, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Both the rich and the poor are completely dependent on God for salvation. People are only saved by God's love and grace (Jn 6:44).

(S) Third. The reward for sacrificial service in God's kingdom. Peter said that he and the other disciples had left everything and had followed Christ. He asked what they would receive. Jesus gave his disciples a very reassuring answer. At the Second Coming of Jesus Christ everything will be made new and God will reward both the apostles and all his other children. Whoever has made sacrifices for the sake of Jesus Christ will receive many times more than they gave up. In the future they will inherit God's kingdom in its final form, which is the new heaven and the new earth (Mk 10:29-30).

(T) Fourth. The warning about *the first and the last*. God does not look at people and their success in the same way as people do. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Cor 4:5). The people who are *the first*, are the people, who because of their wealth, education and position, or success, accomplishments and prestige, are highly regarded by people in general, and sometimes even by Christians. But because God looks at the heart, many of these people will be assigned to a position behind the others in God's kingdom, and some will even be excluded from God's kingdom (Mt 7:21-23). The people who are *the first* may be Christians who have believed in Christ since they were young and have served him all their life. Instead of seeing this as a great privilege, they have come to regard this as a merit, as something God would reward them for. The people who are *the last* may be people who are converted later in life, like Zacchaeus, the hard businessman and tax collector (Lk 19:1-10) or the hard-core criminal and murderer crucified together with Jesus (Lk 23:39-43). Many of those who are regarded as very important in the Church will be *the last*, and many who were totally unknown on earth, will be *the first*. Such people may be like the poor widow, who contributed everything she owned (Mk 12:41-44). They may be like Mary of Bethany, whose act of kindness to Jesus was criticised by the disciples (Mt 26:8). The children, who put their trust in Jesus Christ will be first, while the disciples, who quarrelled about their position of importance, will be the last (Mt 18:1-4; 20:20-28). Jesus warns everyone against a spirit that desires to belong to *the first*.

When Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner", he intends to tell us what will happen when the reign of God in its final phase on the judgement day is unfolded.

(S) The story of the parable is contained in Matthew 20:1-15.

The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Matthew 20:16. Jesus concludes this parable in the same way he concluded Matthew 19:16-30, "So the last will be the first, and the first will be the last." Jesus warns his disciples and all Christians not to be among *the first* who will become *the last!* Three things may be said about the people who regard themselves as *the first*:

One. The people who are regarded as *the first* think that they should be rewarded for their accomplished work! Peter was eager to know what he and the other disciples would get, because they had left everything and followed Jesus. Jesus promised that they would be richly rewarded for their trust and obedience. But he warned them to avoid falling prey to "the work-for-wages spirit". Salvation is always a gracious gift from God and never something earned! Even rewards from God are *expressions of God's unmerited grace and love for his people and never a compensation for accomplished work!*

(T) Two. The people who are regarded as *the first* think they should be rewarded in proportion to their accomplished work. They fail to recognise that God is sovereign and that only he has the right to distribute his favours and give his rewards as he pleases! God has the right to give salvation to a person who becomes a believer in Christ on the last day of his life. No one may criticise God for what he does, because everyone that is saved has been saved by God's grace and not by anything he did!

(S) Three. The people who are regarded as *the first* think that other people should not be rewarded for work they have not done. They are often envious of insignificant people, whom God gives greater honour than to them who have worked hard for God all their lives!

(T) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

This parable has often been abused by allegorical interpretation.

One interpretation regards the parable as describing the various stages of biblical history from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ and from the First to the Second Coming of Christ.

A second interpretation regards *the first* as representing the Jews and *the last* as representing the Gentiles.

A third interpretation concludes that employers should pay all their workers the same wages, no matter how much work they do! However, nothing in the context of the parable suggests these interpretations.

On the contrary, the parable does not teach what we do for God, but what God does for us. Jesus condemns *the attitude that seeks to deal with God on the basis of "so much pay for so much work"*! Jesus teaches that *God deals with people on basis of the principle: the first will be last and the last will be first!* Let us take turns to explain which of the details in this parable are really essential or relevant:

(S) The landowner has the right to hire whom he wants and to do with his money what he wants. In the kingdom of God, God is the owner of everything and everyone and he sovereignly determines the destinies of people. The right to rule belongs to God and not to us. Salvation is his free gift and not the product of human effort (Eph 2:8-9). This detail is relevant.

(T) The agreement with the first workers was fair. The standard daily wage for both soldiers as workers in Jesus' time was one denarius. The fact that the landowner made an agreement or wage-contract with the workers of the first hour shows that these workers were definitely working for wages. Both employer as well as employees considered this as *fair*, because they agreed on it. This is relevant.

(S) The third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hour. In ordinary labour circumstances, it would be extremely strange to hire workers just one hour before the end of the day! Jesus definitely does not give these details any particular meaning and therefore they are not relevant. What does become clear is that the landowner is very interested in unemployed workers! What is important is not *how long* they worked, but *that* they received work!

(T) The promise. The landowner made no contract with the workers that started late, but he promised them that he would pay them whatever is right. This detail is also relevant. The landowner has the right to employ whoever he wants and pay them whatever he wants.

(S) The words "when evening came" are relevant. The context (Mt 19:28) makes clear that these words point to the end of the world's history, when Christ will judge all people.

(T) The payment of wages begins with the last workers. This detail is relevant, because Christ said, "The last will be first". In this way the first workers get a chance to see what the landowner will do to the last workers at the end of the day.

(S) Each one receives exactly the same reward. When the last workers were paid one denarius, the first workers expected to receive more than they had agreed with the landowner. But they received the same amount as the last workers. They were not only dissatisfied with what they had received, but especially envious of what had been given to the others. The main reason of their dissatisfaction was that the other people who started to work *last* were made to be *the first*, and that they who started to work *first* were made to be *the last!* Nevertheless, they had only themselves to blame for their bad attitude, because they had received what they had agreed with the landowner before they began. It showed that they worked for wages, were greedy and envious. They failed to recognise the owner's rights.

(T) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The parable of the workers in the vineyard teaches about *rewards in God's kingdom*.

The main message of the parable is as follows. "God has the sovereign right with respect to whom he employs in his kingdom and how he rewards them on the Final Judgement Day. Therefore people must avoid being among the first who become the last. They must avoid falling prey to the work-for-wages spirit with respect to spiritual matters." They

receive salvation as a gracious gift from God and not as something earned!

Servanthood is a fundamental characteristic of God's kingdom. The genuine people of God's kingdom serve without expecting or demanding rewards. They avoid falling prey to "the work-for-wages spirit" with respect to spiritual matters (Mt 19:16,22,27; 20:2,13). They do not fail to recognise the right of God to distribute his favours as he pleases (Mt 20:14-15,23). They acknowledge that God chooses his workers, calls them and gives them whatever rewards he deems suitable! The genuine people of God's kingdom are never envious of other workers in God's kingdom (Mt 20:15,20-28), but regard work in God's vineyard as a great privilege!

(S) **POINT 5. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

All people must know what God is like. God will graciously reward each Christian at the Final Judgement. However, all these rewards are given, not because Christians deserve them or have earned them, but because everything is based on God's love and grace. Even the works that Christians do are based on God's grace! In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a landowner hired workers at different times of the day, but at the end of the day he gave them all exactly the same reward. Although the workers *produced different amounts of work*, in the end they all receive exactly *the same reward*. The parable teaches that God's rewards are not based on *when* a person is called by God or *how long* he has been a Christian. God graciously rewards with eternal life everyone who comes to him, whether early or late in life. God graciously gives the same salvation to everyone who believes, no matter at what stage of his life he is converted!

(T) Christians must know what they should be like. They should serve God with the right attitude or spirit and serve God faithfully and diligently: The people of God's kingdom avoid falling prey to "the work-for-wages spirit" with respect to spiritual matters. They recognise God's sovereign right to reward the people he called with whatever reward he deems suitable.

(S) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the ten virgins. As preparation, please read Matthew 25:1-13.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".