

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

EQUAL-OPPORTUNITY GRACE

Matthew 20:1-16

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' 7They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 8When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' 9When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' 13But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14Take what belongs to you and

go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.
15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16So the last will be
first, and the first will be last.”

DIAGNOSIS: Earning Your Keep

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Hard Work Pays*

“Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,” so said Ben Franklin. And isn’t that the way it’s supposed to work? You wake early, you work a full day, and you earn your paycheck by the sweat of your brow (or your brain, as the case may be). That’s exactly what the first laborers do, with the expectation that they will get the usual daily wage (v. 2). Fair enough!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hard Work Pays Less than You Thought*

But not for long. Evidently Ben Franklin forgot about the turn that Jesus’ parable takes: Wealthy? Possibly. But the hard workers are no wealthier than the slackers who didn’t come to work until later in the day. Why work early, if all you have to show for it is equal pay for unequal work? And, speaking of equal pay, what’s with this vineyard owner, who doesn’t appreciate hard work when he sees it? Who needs him? Maybe those first vineyard workers should just quit this scene and go find a vineyard of their own—be their own masters.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Hard Work Breeds Resentment*

If only it were so easy. But these day laborers don’t have the means to lay claim to their own vineyard. So they will be beholden to one vineyard owner or another. Either they’ll work for this guy, and have to come to terms with the inequity of

this guy's graciousness, or they'll work for some other guy and maintain the illusion that they actually deserve the pay they get. Either way, they'll become resentful, sure that they are worth more than they receive. Resentful at some master who owns the vineyard that is not theirs. Resentful that they can't call their own shots—produce their own fruit. And their resentment will only deepen this vineyard owner's conviction that the last are as important as the first. Truth be told, the vineyard owner didn't need to hire those first laborers at all; he could have done without them, if he chose. Their resentment just makes them less attractive to keep around.

PROGNOSIS: Earning Our Keep

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *His Hard Work Pays*

The first laborers (let's give them another name: "religious authorities of the day") saw nothing attractive about keeping a latecomer around. They'd been working for the vineyard (make that the temple) 24/7; they knew when to show up, how to work hard. Then along comes a newby (let's call him Jesus) claiming to have won the heart of the owner. There was no way these workers were going to let Jesus get to the end of the day, only to earn the same pay as they would! So they cut his day short, actually his life, which only brought him closer to the Owner's heart. He hadn't complained one bit about the work he had been asked to do. He just labored, even took on the burden of others' work, to produce the fruit the Vineyard Owner had been looking for. Funny then, that having his work day cut short, ends up getting the fruit the Owner is looking for. Cut off from the hard work of laboring in the vineyard, this Worker dies and still produces the fruit that truly pays. By his work on the cross Jesus doesn't just earn the usual daily wage, he wins the Owner's heart (much to the earlier workers' chagrin). And when you have the heart of the Vineyard Owner, you've got pay enough

to share. And that's exactly why Jesus labors, and is willing to have his day cut short: He is determined not only to earn our wage with God so we don't have to worry about whether we deserve what we get; he is willing to bear the burden of the day, so we can come to appreciate the generosity of the Boss (v. 15).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Your Work is Less Important than You Thought*

Jesus releases us, his fellow workers in God's vineyard, from the burden of needing to earn our own way. He may know the Owner intimately, but he unburdens us with the blood of his brow. And to that we say, Amen! Thank you, Jesus, for being so generous. Released into the arms of a generous God, we are free to re-evaluate how life works. For instance, lining up in the morning, being ready, working hard for the duration of the day in God's vineyard really doesn't win any bonuses—unless, I suppose, you do it for the sheer joy of working hard and accomplishing something for the Owner (not yourself). So we work, not because we need God's kudos, but because the Vineyard Owner wants to see us produce fruit. So fruit is what comes forth from the vineyard, and those lined up at the end of the day spend a whole lot less time grumbling over who gets what. Instead they know exactly what to expect from this Owner: this vineyard offers equal-opportunity grace.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Your Work Is More Important than You Thought*

So why work? Because your neighbor—maybe a fellow vineyard worker, maybe someone else—needs the fruit you produce. In fact, they are starving for it. And if the world is to have a steady diet of healthy food, your fruit needs to be part of the plan. So, you work hard, not because you have to, but because you want to—not only in gratitude to the generous Owner, but for the sake of that neighbor.