

Exodus 16:2-15
 Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
 Philippians 1:21-30
 Matthew 20:1-16



THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE A HOUSEHOLDER

The unbelieving world views the teachings of Jesus as lessons on how men would live together in peace if they could only follow his advice. If all men were to love their neighbors and forgive those who trespass against them, there would be peace and harmony on earth. The trouble, from the world's view, is that everyone must live this way, or the formula will not work. If only a few try it, they are going to suffer.

The texts we have been discussing these last few weeks say this is exactly what Jesus requires of his followers. We must deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow him, whether everyone else decides to or not. "Why should we do this?" the world asks, and it cannot find a logical answer.

The world is right in asking. The real question is not about how men should live, but why we should surrender our lives to Christ and live in obedience to him. The answer lies in his claim to be the Son of God, which the world refuses to believe, and in his death on the cross for our sins, which the world considers unnecessary, and finally in his resurrection from the dead, which the world says is not possible.

Jesus said he would return a second time, to judge the nations: "*When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations ...*" (Matt 25:31).¹ Those who have been his followers in this life will be gathered into his kingdom. Those who have chosen to live for themselves will not. They will go away into eternal punishment.

In order to teach and guide his followers (and others as well), Jesus said many things about his "kingdom" which was to come. For example, he told Pilate his kingdom was "*not of this world*" (John 18:36). He told the Pharisees, "*The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you*" (Luke 17:20-21).

And in Matthew's gospel, he gave us seven parables, saying, "*The kingdom of heaven is like ...*" We have discussed six of these, all in Matt 13, on recent Sundays. Today we have the seventh, in Matt 20.

These parables are all about the kingdom of God, and they also have this in common: each parable has something to say about what you and I must *be* or *become* in order to *live* in the kingdom of God. And since the kingdom is here, now, in the midst of us, we can begin to act today on these sayings.

Matthew 20:1-16. ¹"*The kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. ⁵Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each received a denarius. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, 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 a denarius?' ¹⁴Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last."*

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

• “*A householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard ...*” (v.1). The scenario was typical throughout the Holy Land in those days. Laborers would show up early in the morning at the village plaza, hoping to get work and scrape up enough to feed the wife and family another day.

The landowners, anxious to get the crop in before it spoiled, would arrive at dawn and try to hire enough people to get the job done. The going rate was a denarius – just enough to keep a family alive another day.

• “*And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place ...*” (v.3). This householder apparently was anxious about getting his grapes harvested. He hired the first laborers about 6:00 AM, then went in and hired more at 9:00, noon, 3:00 PM, and the last at 5:00, only an hour before quitting time! It was as if he wished to get every person he could to work in his vineyard.

• “*Each received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more ...*” (v.9-10). “Well,” we would say, “They certainly earned more – they worked twelve hours under that hot sun! These last people only worked one hour!” But apparently this householder had his own idea of “fairness.”

Perhaps he knew some of those last workers (who, according to v.7, would have worked longer if they could). Maybe he knew their children and thought, “One hour’s pay isn’t going to feed those kids.”

• “*He replied to one, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?’*” (v.13) In spite of the apparent unfairness here, the householder had at least three good arguments. First, there was the verbal agreement. Both parties agreed to one denarius for a day’s work. Second, the money belongs to the householder, and he can hand it out as he wishes – give it away free if he wants to. And third, there is *generosity* and *mercy* here on the part of the landowner. No one should object to these things.

• “*So the last will be first, and the first last*” (v.16). This seems to be the summation of the parable. Let us see what it says to us about the kingdom of God, and about those who are (or will be) in the midst of it.

First, there is a similar saying, like a matching bookend, at the beginning of the parable: “*But many that are first will be last, and the last first*” (19:30). (There are no chapter breaks in the original text.) The parable of the vineyard describes workers who felt they should be paid according to the hours they worked. In the previous chapter, Peter expressed a similar feeling: “*Lo, we have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?*” Jesus answered that they would become the judges of Israel “*in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne,*” but then he included all his followers as “*inheritors of eternal life.*” Which is more valuable? Next came the parable of the vineyard.

Second, there is the implied reprimand of Peter and the disciples, who had not yet seen the absurdity of seeking authority or honor in the kingdom of God based on anything like “length of service.” God made this clear in the prophets: “*For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite’*” (Isa 57:15). And Jesus also, in saying to Nicodemus, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*” (John 3:5). “Length of service” doesn’t seem to carry much weight in these sayings.

Nor was this “feeling of deserved privilege” unique among the disciples. Years after the resurrection, the Jewish Christians were still having trouble accepting Gentiles as equals. And even today we find people in the church saying, “I’ve been coming here for years. These newcomers should recognize that!”

And most of all, we see in the kindness of the householder something of the wonderful grace and mercy of God. The householder kept looking for more people to labor in the vineyard. So does God. He also owns the vineyard. The Bible says Jesus is not “slow” about his promise to return, but “*is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Pet 3:9).

Furthermore, we remarked how kind the householder was in responding, not to the worth of his laborers, but to their burdens and needs. So does Jesus. He is waiting for you now to come and ask for mercy and forgiveness and new life in him: “*And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you ... if you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*” (Luke 11:9-13). Will you now respond today to God’s grace, and ask Jesus for the free gift of new life forever in the vineyard of God?