Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“The Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard” (Matt 20:1).

Ez 34:1-11; Matt 20:1-16

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers was another attempt by Jesus to present God's unconditional gift of mercy. It was addressed to the good people who resented Jesus' outreach to sinners. They could not understand why God would love sinners as much as those who had been obedient all their lives. They were the vineyard workers who had worked all day in the heat of the sun for the promised full wage. Why should latecomers and slackers enjoy the same full pay they had earned?

The parable applied again a generation later to Jewish Christians who wondered how gentile converts could be welcomed into the church without having to observe the Mosaic Law they had kept. The cry against such unlimited mercy for everyone: "It isn't fair!" echoes down through history. How can God set aside the moral meritocracy that has made virtuous people conclude that they were better than others because they had somehow "earned" heaven?

It was precisely this self-righteous divisiveness that Jesus was addressing in his many parables of mercy. No one can earn eternal life with God because it is a gift. Virtue is its own reward and vice its own punishment. Human systems of morality bring order in this world, but they do not automatically promise life after death, and certainly not the "full wage" of salvation, divine life forever. The essence of that life is love, which is the very nature of God. God's love is offered to saint and sinner alike. Only those who cannot bear such infinite and unconditional love will be excluded from it, but not by God. They will exclude themselves, the ultimate tragedy of pride that cannot accept the divine gift.

Jesus taught in parables because no single revelation of God is enough. The Parable of the Vineyard Workers continues to challenge our logic and sense of fairness. Only when we understand that we are all latecomers and slackers, lost sheep, prodigal sons and daughters, indebted servants and sinners, will we break through the illusion that we can earn heaven because we are better than others. Only then will we be able to open our hearts with gratitude to realize that God's love is there for us, has always been there in full, needing only our surrender to the face of God, Mercy itself. This is the Joy of the Gospel.

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