

The purpose of this leader's guide is to be a tool for ABF and Life Group leaders to follow the sermon series with their group. Our hope is that this guide will give you a head start for your study and will allow your group to respond to what they've heard and apply it for life.\*

**Why Parables?.** In Definition the word parable comes the Greek word 'parabole,' which means "a placing beside" and therefore is a comparison or an illustration. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain about 30 of these stories while John's gospel contains no parables but does use figures of speech. A parable is a story taken from real life (or real life situation) from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. They are not fables (talking animals/walking trees). They are not allegories where every detail has hidden meaning. They are basically an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

When Jesus began to teach in parables, it represented a new direction in His ministry. We are told that from when they were introduced, from this point forward, Jesus typically taught the multitudes in this form. He continued to teach his disciples in a plain manner, but the crowds primarily got parables (Matthew 13:11, Mark 4:11).

### **Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**

**Context of Matthew 20:1-16.** The parable of the workers in the vineyard is the next parable after the unforgiving servant according to Matthew. The parable follows Jesus' teaching on divorce and the story of a rich young man that approached him about receiving eternal life. In chapter 19, Jesus gives us the key to receiving eternal life when He says, "With man this *eternal life* is impossible, but with God all things are impossible (emphasis added)." Jesus starts the parable of the workers with "For the kingdom of heaven is like.." Based on what Jesus says in verse 30 of chapter 19 and how He closes this parable (so the last will be first, and the first last), we receive the main point of the text which is covered below. The audience in the text appears to be His disciples based on 19:23.

#### **Read Matthew 20:1-16 - Story, Explanation, and Lesson**

##### **A) Story for clarity**

**Death bed conversion?** A number of years ago a soon-to-be executed mass-murderer, guilty of particularly gruesome and abhorrent crimes, made a last-minute conversion to Christ. He understood that Christ died for even the worst sinners. This man rejoiced, along with the pastor, in the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. More than a few Christians doubted his conversion and grumbled saying, 'He doesn't deserve to go to heaven.' They even said, 'He ought to fry in Hell for what he did' and also said, 'we have served God for so many years, but he has lived like he wanted, only to confess Christ in the end.' If we are honest, we may have to admit our sympathy for this sentiment. Perhaps most of us feel some discomfort and view this as unfair that a mass-murderer might will not ultimately suffer for this evil. The problem is that this view has failed to understand grace. This may be hard to accept, but it is a conclusion that is unavoidable if you take seriously the words of Jesus in our text.

##### **B) Explanations:**

**1) Main idea: The first will be last and the last will be first.** Jesus mentions this phrase twice in the context of what He is teaching. If we are honest, this phrase might be hard to accept especially in the context of this parable. This might be even harder for us to accept coming from

a western culture. It is likely that the parable is bracketed by these phrases because it should be understood as an explanation of the principle of reversal found in the parable. Heaven and hell will be full of surprises. Many whom we would expect to be numbered among the first of God's people will be last and many whom we would expect to be last will be first. About this parable D.A. Carson says, "From it, we learn how the last can be first and the first last - by free grace." The amount of time working for each laborer in this parable seems to be the unfair issue. Jesus is making the point that anything we receive from God is not unfair but is a gift and comes from His generosity (v. 15). Jesus is following up His point when He answers Peter's question at the end of chapter 19. That those who are last now, who are outcasts and rejected because they followed Jesus, will be first in the age to come. It is the unexpected, upside-down nature of God's kingdom. This answers all objections from mankind, the Jews, and all peoples based on our system, our economy. How can the Gentiles be accepted into the kingdom when they have not been God's chosen people for thousands of years? How can someone who is converted late in life receive eternal life just as someone who has followed Jesus from their youth? The answer to this and in this parable is this, 'God's economy is not like ours. He acts in grace toward all of us, not based on our labor or effort, or how good or bad we've been, but based on His generosity and grace through Christ.

**2) Other explanations: God's Call and Reward.** We can learn something about God's call in this parable. v1). Typically a farmer would go to the marketplace located in a village's central square to find workers, leaving early in the morning, perhaps 6am, in order to get a full day's labor out of his workers (v.2). A denarius was the expected pay for a day's labor. it was normal pay for normal work. Apparently the landowner was eager to get his work done. At regular intervals he went back to hire additional workers (vv.3,4,5). At around 5pm he hires the last set of workers (vv.6,7). We can learn that the call of God comes to different nations/peoples at different stages in the history of redemption and at different stages in an individual's life. A great example of how God calls differently would be that of John the Baptist the Apostle Paul. John the Baptist was called by God and filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb while Paul was called by God and converted as an Adult. John faithfully served God from infancy, while Paul ordered the death of believers until he met Jesus. God's call comes at different times and is not based on the goodness of our life or merit, but on His redemptive plan, His choosing, for His glory.

What about rewards for those who faithfully serve God? Although one may truly have a death-bed conversion and be saved, they would not receive much reward in heaven. God gives promises of rewards in scripture to those who have served Him faithfully (Matt. 6:4, 1 Cor. 3:10-15, 1 Cor. 9:24-25, 2 Cor. 5:10, 2 Timothy 4:8). Although our earning of God's acceptance into His kingdom can never be earned, we should not fail to understand God's promise of reward for those who follow Him. The main point of this parable however is when people stand before God and receive judgement, it will turn out different than we think. Those that we think will receive great reward will be humbled and people in the church we would never expect will be first.

### **C) The Lesson**

This parable is not about wise management of labor. A proper way to view the parable is that the land owner was gracious in paying the first laborer anything at all and even more generous to pay the last laborer more than what might be expected. We assume that justice requires that all gifts be distributed equally. But in God's economy even 'working' in His kingdom should be

viewed as gift of His grace. If God chooses to bless and give to one and not the other, it is His right. He has mercy on whom He has mercy and compassion on whom He has compassion (Romans 9:15, 21). This parable exposes a heart of ungratefulness and entitlement. This parable causes us to check our motives. We serve God not because of what we will receive or think we deserve but because God has shown us His grace by letting us even know Him and be a part of His kingdom. Jesus teaches us that when all is said and done we will be surprised at those who God says is last and who God says is first. If the laborer who was hired first was focused on the joy of working for the master and not looking around at what others were receiving his heart would have been in the right place and he would have been grateful not grumbling. As we serve and work in God's kingdom, we should serve God with great joy focused on Him, not comparing ourselves to others.

### **General Reflection:**

- 1) What does this passage teach us about God?
- 2) What does this passage teach us about mankind?
- 3) What is a command to obey in this passage? What has God revealed in your life that needs changing? What truth can be applied to your life about the gospel?

### **Personal Reflection/Application**

- 4) After hearing the story of the converted mass-murderer, what was your initial feeling or response? Be honest. How should we properly view this story and properly respond?
- 5) Notice the verses that bracket this parable in 19:30 and 20:16. What is Jesus trying to teach?
- 6) Jesus is intentional when He tells of the laborers that were hired at different times of the day. What point is He trying to make and what lesson can we learn?
  - What can we learn about our salvation? About our works after salvation?
  - What can we learn about God?
  - What does this point teach us about how we view the most evil people that appear to be converted?
- 7) If we are honest we can respond with sympathy for the laborers who worked in the heat of the day? Why do you think our hearts naturally respond this way? What can we learn about our hearts and why is this significant on how we view and relate to God? How we relate to people?
- 8) Have you ever been close to someone who had a late conversion, even on their deathbed? How did you respond? What did God teach you through His word concerning that situation?
- 9) This parable exposes the attitude of the heart. We can assume Peter asked the question in the previous chapter because he was like “what is in it for me if I give up all and serve you?” What attitude does it expose? What should our motive be as we “work” in the kingdom of God?

### **Prayer**

Father, help me to see that everything we have is a gift of generosity from you. Give me a heart of gratitude and thanksgiving for the grace you have shown me. Help me to trust that whoever you choose to be generous to is right, fair, and good. Help me to see others as you see them.