

## Matthew 20:1-16

If you happen to be a big fan of the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team, you're probably having quite a bit of fun this year, because in spite of their recent slump, it's looking like the Brewers are going to make it into the playoffs, and still might even win their division. But even in a really **off** year, there is still **hope**. Back in 1990, when I was living in Minnesota, the Minnesota Twins finished the year in **last place** in their division. But the very **next** year, they finished in **first place** in all of baseball - winning their second World Series title.

Going from **last** to **first** is the same kind of situation which we find in our text for today, where Jesus tells us the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. The whole situation came about because of a question which **Peter** had asked on behalf of all Jesus' disciples. He said, "*We have left **everything** to follow You. What then will there be for us?*" It's not an unusual question at all. Many times we have heard people ask - and have perhaps even asked ourselves, "What's in it for **me**?" The reply which Jesus gave to Peter, in the form of a **parable**, implies that your **attitude** has a lot to do with whether you will be rated **first** or **last**. Let's take a look at the **beginning** of Jesus' parable where He shows us that **The Last Will Be First**.

Jesus said, "*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.*" We're told here that a certain landowner needed some help in his vineyard. In order to get the help he needed, he went to the marketplace early in the morning - about 6:00. Why the **marketplace**? Because that was the gathering spot for people who were in need of employment. And the landowner obviously **found** some men who were willing to **work** for him - that is, if the **price** was right. Since **haggling** was the common method for establishing an acceptable **wage**, we can assume that the landowner and these men also went through that **formality**. I say formality, because in the **end**, they came to an agreement at one **denarius** for one day's **work** - which was the widely accepted rate anyway. Now so far nothing really **unusual** has happened in the parable. These men were looking for **work**, and they were clearly in it for the **money**. Their unwritten contract, to which both the employer and the employees had agreed - called for a denarius per day - a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. Incidentally, a fair day's work in those days was **12 hours**, running roughly from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. - or about sunrise to sunset.

Now as our text goes on, things start to get a little more **interesting**. We hear, “About the **third** hour (the landowner) 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.’” Now this is **unusual**. This landowner either has a **huge** vineyard, requiring **immense** numbers of workers - or he is a **humanitarian** who just can't stand to see someone who really wants to **work** without a **job**. So, he goes out to the marketplace again at 9:00, noon, 3:00, and 5:00, and he hires workers **every time** - even with only **one hour** left in the workday. The other unusual thing which happens here is that **no haggling** takes place. All these workers simply take the landowner at **face value** - trusting that he will follow through on his word, and pay them whatever amount is **right**.

Now, it's at the **end** of the workday where things really get turned **upside-down**. Our text continues, “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**.’” Normally, we would think that the saying, “First come, first served,” would apply here. But in this parable, Jesus actually **reversed** that order. **Why** do you suppose He did that? I think it was so that those who had been hired **first** would have the opportunity to see what **happened** to those who were hired **last**. You see, the landowner was going to show the last ones great **generosity**. And if those who had been **hired** first were **paid** first, they would simply have taken their wages and went **home** - and they would have **missed out** on the landowner's magnanimous gesture.

However, even though these workers **witnessed** this gesture, they still missed its **point**. Our text continues, “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.’” There is a great contrast of **emotions** in these verses. On the one hand, those who had been hired **last** were **overjoyed** - because they had received a

**whole day's wage**, for only **one hour** of work. But on the **other** hand, those who had been hired **first** were extremely **disappointed** - even though they received a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, just as they had agreed upon. They started **grumbling** - and the word which is used here actually sounds like the action - both in Greek as well as in English. When someone starts to grumble, mutter, murmur, mumble ... well, you get the idea ... the words sound like the action. What they were saying was, "*We worked **harder and longer** than the others, so we deserve to receive something **better**.*"

But what these men failed to understand, was that they **didn't** deserve anything better. They wanted wages for their work, and they got **exactly** what they had **bargained** for. They also failed to recognize the rights of the **landowner**, to do **whatever he wanted** with the things that were **his**. Ultimately, it was **envy** which had completely clouded their thinking, and the landowner **told** them so.

Now, we dare not lose sight of the fact that this text is a **parable** - an earthly story with a heavenly meaning - a meaning which in this parable, focuses on **attitude**. There are a couple of things which I'd like you to take **home** from this sermon. The first is that there is **more** to life than **money**. That's what those **first** workers were concerned about - and that's what they **received** - but it didn't make them **happy**. On the other hand, the **later** workers weren't **concerned** about money. In fact, those who were hired just an hour before quitting time **gladly** went to **work**, even without any **guarantee** that they would be paid **at all**. They probably worked all the **harder**, just because the landowner had given them a **chance**. He certainly seemed like a **nice guy**, and perhaps they had heard that his vineyard was a **good place** to work - or maybe, they just **enjoyed working** the soil with their hands. They **would** have worked the whole day, but they hadn't been given that **opportunity**. As it turned out, their **misfortune** in not being hired **earlier**, led to their great **fortune** - as they experienced the tremendous **generosity** of this landowner. He obviously appreciated both their **attitude**, and their **work ethic**.

And the **second** thing I want you to take home is that everything belongs to **God**, and He can do **whatever He pleases** with it. So don't be **envious** of what the LORD has done for **others**, thinking that we have received the **short end** of the stick. In Jesus' parable, the first workers thought they **deserved** more, because they had **done** more - and they had worked **longer**. Sometimes **we** fall into that same trap. But, we need to remember that God doesn't love some of us **more**

because we have worked for Him **harder** or **longer** than others, nor because we have superior **minds** or **abilities** over others. The people who became Christians **first** and who worked at it the **longest** will come out **last** if they **complain** that God is **unfair**. And the people who became Christians **last** and barely worked at it **at all** will come out **first** through God's great **generosity**. God's love is purely an expression of His **grace** - **regardless** of our efforts to **earn** it. We can **pile up** all our wonderful **merits** in front of God, but we can't **earn** His favor. Our relationship with God can't be **purchased** either, because it's a **gift**. In fact, we can all be eternally **grateful** that God has **not** dealt with us as we **deserve** - because all of our merits have come up **short** - and have earned **nothing** but eternal **damnation**.

In one of my former congregations, we had a beautiful banner which read **Jesus First, Others Second, Yourself Last**. The first letter of each phrase spelled out the word **JOY**. And indeed, putting **Jesus first** in our lives, with **others** second, and ourselves in **last** place; **does** make a formula for true **joy**. Because even though **we** come out **last**, we can always take comfort in the fact that Jesus has assured us **The Last Will Be First**. After all, our Almighty, All-knowing, and All-loving **God** is taking care of us, and we couldn't ask for **anything better** than that. May we never **grumble** about our position in God's kingdom compared to someone else, but rather, may we always **appreciate** God's **undeserved love** for us. Amen.