

Matthew 20:1-16

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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The Nonsensical Vineyard at the End of the Day

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

There's a popular argument in Christianity that the goal of Christianity is to make this world work as much like the kingdom of heaven as possible. People who like this idea tend to take Bible stories about salvation, dissect them to fit their preconceived notions, and come up with a list of ways you should change your life to make it better – which is a bit like dissecting a frog, rearranging the parts into the shape of a bird, and expecting it to fly away. Every now and then, for instance, someone will publish a "biblical diet" cookbook, promising that you'll lose weight if you follow the recipes of Scripture. Now, it's quite true that you will reduce your weight if you limit your intake to locusts and wild honey, but that's not why John the Baptist eats what he eats.

You'll have other authors who write books about biblical principles for investing your money, which are really just common-sense practices with Bible quotes. You'll also have those business management books, which labor heavy and hard to prove to you that Jesus was the best entrepreneur and personnel manager ever, and that you can build your Christian company by doing what He did.

Then you get to this parable. If you are seeking to build a business from the ground up, I can guarantee you that by following the business principles practiced in this text, you will drive your company straight into the ground in no time at all. The dumpster fire of your dream will be impressive.

Just look at how this man manages his vineyard. The goal of a vineyard is to produce grapes, then wine, yes? This requires a workforce, so he goes and hires laborers. So far, so good; but apparently he hasn't thought to calculate how many workers he needs to run the place. In the course of one day, he goes out and hires workers five times – he's still out and hiring for the day just one hour before it ends!

When it does end shortly thereafter, he lines up the workers to be paid, starting with the slackers who worked only one hour in the cool of the day, and working his way back to the ones who have been breaking their backs for twelve hours. For his one-hour wonders, he pays a full day's wage, which no doubt delights them ... and really gets the hopes up for the full-day laborers. But when they finally get to the front of the line, they also receive a day's pay: it's what they agreed to, but it's not fair. The way the world works, they should get twelve times as much as the one-hour crew.

This scenario is nonsensical as a business model. The day begins the vineyard owner unable to calculate the number of workers he needs. By the end of the day, he's got personnel problems beyond imagination. Most of his laborers are angry at him at various levels because they feel like they've been ripped off – even the ones who got a full day's pay for three hours' work will still be upset that some got paid the same for one hour's. That's bad enough, but the next day is going to be a nightmare. Now all the laborers know that if they only work an hour at the end of the day, they're going to get a full day's wage. Human nature being what it is, even though everyone's gotten paid at least the going rate, the owner will find no one to work in his vineyard until it's an hour before sunset on the following day.

Did I not say that this was a dumpster fire in the making? I mean, if you're starting a business and thinking about following the principles in this text, I can assure you that your company will last longer if you hire *me* to run it for you. It still won't last long, but it will last longer. Probably.

What happens in this parable doesn't make sense at all if the vineyard owner is trying to build a successful business and pay a fair wage for work. But maybe that's not what the vineyard owner is up to:

this parable is about the kingdom of heaven, not corporate growth, after all. Here's what the owner is up to: at the end of the day, he does not reward the workers for the work they have done. He rewards them for being in the vineyard at the end of the day. When he goes out and calls them, they hear his summons and they come. Whenever they arrive, they stay in the vineyard; and at the end of the day, they all receive the same for being there.

Sure, you can argue that the vineyard owner is unfair, giving everyone the same reward. But you can't deny that he's incredibly generous in doing so.

You see where this is going, yes? The vineyard is the kingdom of heaven, the owner is the Lord, and you are the laborers. You're in the vineyard because the Lord has called you in – you wouldn't be in His kingdom if He hadn't summoned you by name, called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified you so that you're set free from the bondage of sin. Within the vineyard, you go about your labors: probably not literally picking or stomping grapes, but going about your various callings of parent, child, spouse, single, employer, employee, student, citizen and the like. You go about your various labors knowing that you'll succeed sometimes and you'll fail sometimes. But whatever happens, you know that the Lord isn't going to reward you based upon your job performance. You know that salvation is yours because you're already in the vineyard. You know that you're in the vineyard because He's gathered you in.

Furthermore, you know that He's gathered you in, and that He's keeping you, because He's paid the price of His own blood to bring you in.

And further-furthermore, you know that the sacrifice of Jesus is so comprehensive, so all-sufficient, that the Lord isn't going to run out of pay for the workers. If the whole world repents and believes, there's room. If you've been in the kingdom since you were baptized the day you were born, the kingdom of heaven is yours. If you come to the faith in the eleventh hour on your deathbed, the same kingdom of heaven is yours. The Lord doesn't prorate and say, "You didn't give me a whole lifetime, so I've reserved for you an apartment next to the freeway in the bad part of town." He speaks only of a mansion with many rooms.

That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. The Lord's ultimate goal is not how much work you can churn out, but that you're in the kingdom for the sake of Jesus.

This means that your life as a Christian is not about working as hard as you can to get into the vineyard, because you're already there. In fact, your life as a Christian is not foremost about serving Jesus because He's saved you. Instead, your life is foremost about staying in the vineyard because the Lord has already got you there. And how do you do that? You keep getting rid of all the sin that's trying to persuade you, scare you or seduce you so that you leave the vineyard. How do you get rid of that sin? By being forgiven: that's why, as a Christian, the foremost focus of your life even now is not what you can do, but what Jesus keeps doing for you – forgiving your sins by means of His Word and Supper. That's what keeps you in the vineyard – Christian worship is all about keeping you in the vineyard. And as long as you're secure in the vineyard, then you can go about the work that God has given. As long as you're in the vineyard, what you do is pleasing to Him.

This is why the sin of the parable is idleness. The workers outside the vineyard are idle. They're not pounding on the vineyard gates trying to get in. Whatever they're doing, they're not doing the work that the vineyard owner would have them do; and in the world of that parable, there's no other place to work. One is either gathered by the vineyard owner, or one is idle because he isn't.

An idle mind believes there is nothing to do, which tells you right away that it is deceived: there are actually many good things to do, because God gives you all sorts of people to serve, and all sorts of labors and callings in which to serve them. When an idle mind says, "There is nothing to do," it's actually saying, "I don't want to do anything good, so I'll do nothing at all." But idle minds don't do nothing:

resisting the good, they turn to the bad. They wander where they shouldn't and stray to sinful things, which is why you don't want anyone to check your browser history if you've been bored. Idle minds want to justify their actions, so they build extravagant cases as to why doing nothing good *is* good. Thoughts lead to actions though, and idle thoughts lead to actions that are at best useless and at worst catastrophic. There's a large number of people who have destroyed their families, their lives and/or their careers, and their explanation begins with, "I don't know what happened."

There's a reason for the saying, "An idle mind is the devil's playground," and you're under attack right now. There is no place more conducive to daydreaming than church, because your sinful flesh doesn't want to hear the Word. The most entertaining squirrels in the world are the ones outside the window during the sermon; and it's even possible that you get a little miffed when the sermon hymn is ten verses long because absorbing that much good stuff takes work.

But work is good! It's a gift from God! When the Lord created Adam and Eve, He didn't put them in a garden with a couple of hammocks and say, "I want you to lie around all day." He gave them the stewardship over all creation. They could serve Him by their daily labors; and while sin has brought all sorts of thorns and thistles and trouble to your tasks, work is still a gift from God.

Beware idleness. It's one thing to take a break because you need to be mentally refreshed. It's another thing to abandon your labors in favor of doing nothing good at all. After all, you have this joy: the Lord uses you as His instruments. You are His hands, His feet and His voice to keep this world bumping along by your service to others; and it is an honor to be an instrument in the hands of the Lord.

But more than that, rejoice in this: Adam and Eve weren't given work to do to get into the garden of Eden, but they could go about godly labors because He had already brought them in. (And if only they had continued to abide by His Word!) As you go about your tasks, you do so with the joy that you're already in the vineyard. The Lord has gathered you in by His death and resurrection. He has made you alive so that you might serve Him, and you do so with the assurance that salvation is yours in Christ. So go about your tasks, repent of your sins, make frequent use of His means of grace so that you remain in the vineyard. And rejoice! For, at the end of the day, when the Lord returns in glory, no matter how long you have been His child, the kingdom of heaven is yours forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen