

Here's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's the crack of dawn and there you are, just standing there, praying for work—anything just to pay the bills—shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest of the day laborers. Suddenly, a pickup pulls up, "Hey," the driver calls out, "I'll give you a hundred bucks if you come work for me." Your heart leaps in your chest. Hey, it's not a ton, but it's \$100 more than you have right now. So, you jump in the back of the truck and head over to the farm. You drive in, hop out, and get down to business.

After a few hours of old fashioned hard work, you're feeling good. It's nice to use your hands and be able to see what you've already accomplished. But then you look up and see the landowner shaking his head—there's a lot more work to be done—so you watch as he jumps back into his truck and drives off toward town. A little later, you see him come back with another truckload of workers, who then join you in the fields.

Again, at noon, the boss still doesn't look happy. Again, there goes that pickup, peeling out in a cloud of dust. And again it comes, with a whole new set of workers.

Same thing happens at three in the afternoon. Off he goes and back he returns.

And would you believe it, even at five o'clock—just one hour till quittin' time—barely any room to work with all the workers stepping on each other, and—get this—the boss still drives off to town for yet more workers. I don't know about you, but to me this is crazy! I mean, who does that? With all the work that's getting done, all the laborers who're already doing it, and with only sixty minutes left to go, can you believe this guy actually goes looking for more workers!

Anyway, the clock strikes six, the sun's goin' down, it's been a full day. So, here everyone gathers around the landowner, waiting to get paid. The boss starts with the newbies, the guys who've only been here an hour, barely breaking a sweat. He puts a whole hundred dollar bill in each of their hands. Wow, you think! If it's that much per hour then just imagine, 100 x 12! After putting in twelve hours, surely you'll get 1,200 smackers! You rub our hands together in anticipation—cha-ching!—you've struck it rich! Daydreaming about whether you'll put it toward the in-ground swimming pool you've always wanted, or the European vacation your wife's always talked about, you're barely paying attention to what's going on around you.

But then, it's your turn. Soaking through your shirt, dirt under our nails, massaging your aching back, it's finally time for you to get your share. You hold out both hands, palms open, after all, that's a lot coming to you, or so you think. And into your hands, your employer places one single solitary bill. You keep holding them out . . . waiting . . . where's the rest?

You look down to make sure you're not mistaken. Then, you look up at the boss with expectant eyes—he's just staring back at you, like he doesn't know. "Hey, what's the big idea?" you ask, "I watched you give those Johnny-come-latelies who barely put in an hour the exact same as me, and I've been at it all day!" The nerve of the guy—you know what he says? "Friend, I've done you no wrong—didn't you agree to work for a hundred? Well, what is that in your hand?" He's got you there, but something just doesn't feel right.

Where's the justice? Where's the fairness? Some get a full day's wages no matter when they arrive? It just doesn't seem like God's playing by the rules. The scandal only gets worse at the end when Jesus says, "The last will be first, and the first last."

"Oh," say the disciples, "we get the point! Those rotten Pharisees who've always criticized You for eating and drinking with sinners, they think they're first in God's kingdom. But because of their smug self-righteousness, they're gonna wind up on the outside, and *we'll* be the ones who find ourselves on the inside—the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, after all."

“Oh,” said the early church, “we get your point, Jesus. Those Jews, who were supposed to be God’s #1 Chosen People, the inheritors of Your kingdom, just look at how they rejected You. So now, they’ll be in last place, while us Gentiles, who were supposed to be last, will be bumped up to first.”

But y’know, as scandalous as that is, I’m not so sure *that’s* really the big scandal of this story. I mean, this parable has so little to say about wages anyway. A denarius? That’s okay, but it’s anything but big money. Many of you probably scoffed when I said that the boss was offering you only \$100 for working all day out in the hot sun. A denarius was kind of like that—a day’s wage, maybe, if you want your family to barely scrape by. And I’m not even sure this story’s even really about who works when, and for how long.

No, here’s the real scandal—when you look back at the parable, *who’s* it all about? The vineyard owner, right? And *what’s* all the action? Not about what the laborers are up to out in the vineyard, not even the moment it’s time to get paid, but rather the constant back and forth, back and forth of the boss going to town to fetch more workers. It’s pretty silly when you think about it. I mean, what’s his big rush anyway? Were his grapes already overripe? Did he know it would rain tomorrow and his harvest would be ruined? Did he just have a soft spot in his heart for the unemployed? Who knows—it doesn’t say.

What it does say is that he spends little to no time at all in the vineyard, but almost all of his time is spent hittin’ the streets—at six in the morning, again at nine, then at noon, and 3 PM, and one more time at the eleventh hour. Here and there—comes and goes—again and again. All the action in this story takes place at the unemployment office. It’s like the boss won’t rest until everyone in town’s under his employ!

Now, this is just no way to run a vineyard! What type of justice is that, what kind of fairness; what sort of business sense does that make? If it were up to us, this would be no way to run things. For us, it’s about giving people what they’re worth. Like, if you work longer hours then you’re owed more. Or if you’re in school for many years, getting not only your BA, but also your MA, and even your PhD then you should make more. Or if you’re a hard worker, pay your dues, climb your way to the top, then you’ve earned it. That’s the way justice works for us. That’s the type of vineyard owner you and I would be.

So, here we stand with the rest of the laborers—hands out, frowns on our faces, demanding more. After all, many of us have been around the church longer than most. We’ve already put in more volunteer hours, put more money in the plate, put our talents to more use than a lot of other folks. So, what’s the big idea, God? We can’t help but keep our arms crossed, stamping our feet, huffing and puffing.

But y’know, if that’s how we feel, if we insist on fairness, be careful ‘cuz we just might get it. Lord knows, we’re not the first. When it comes to discipleship there are plenty of others who’ve been doing it longer, been doing it better, been doing it more consistently than you or I. As it turns out, in the grand scheme of things, all of us who consider ourselves in first place are actually coming in dead last. We’re no different from those Pharisees, those entitled Jews, those smug self-righteous legalists. And if that’s where we’re at, last in the kingdom of God, well, I can think of worse places to be.

Remember what Jesus says—“The *last* shall be first.” If now you and I feel like we’re in last place because of our spoilsport attitude, don’t panic! We just heard how eleventh-hour workers are just as sought out as those who seem to have a firm footing in God’s kingdom. See, this kingdom’s not ordered like our world—by what we deserve, what’s fair, what’s earned—if that were the case, we’d all be in trouble. But the way God does business is relentless seeking, constant pursuit, unstoping invitation—it is undeserved, unconditional, unfair calling. No matter how we’ve acted—even self-entitled grouches like us—God’s out there, frantically on the lookout, desperately pleading for you and I to still join Him.

As strange, as absurd, as downright scandalous as this parable sounds, it’s the familiar story of the Gospel. Come hell or high water, this vineyard owner will forsake heavenly hearth and home, even get Himself killed in the process—whatever it takes—if it means going out and finding *you*. The grace that we find in this parable—or should I say the grace that finds us—isn’t about the denarius, or who gets paid what, no it’s all about a vineyard owner who won’t be happy till everyone—especially you—is at work in His vineyard. The real gift today is this unexpected Master who never

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stops, never gives up, but is constantly, persistently, relentlessly out there—even up until the midnight hour—to invite you. He's a Master who can't find a moment's peace until He's got you coming back with Him to His kingdom.

Y'know, there are so many other parables like this one, about a God who's come out in search—there's the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price, the lost sheep. There's the prodigal son, but there's also the great banquet. The great banquet is the story where God won't settle down until he's got all people at His table. He goes out to the highways and the byways—inviting anyone and everyone off the streets to fill His banquet hall.

Well, this morning, He kinda does something like that. Even still, even now, He's refusing to ever leave you alone, but He's come out all over again to invite you, to seek you, to find you. Bodily, bloodily, He's in hot pursuit right here at this altar. He's peeking out from behind bread and wine beckoning you to His kingdom. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, it's not too late. See, at this rail, these parables are brought to life—His story of grace gets written into your biography.

So, come to the vineyard, join His banquet. There's always room for one more.