PARABLES

The Compassionate Employer

Matthew 20:1-16

Introduction

Usually this parable is called, "The workers in the vineyard". Such a title puts the focus on the workers/labourers. But the real focus of the parable is on the **amazingly compassionate employer/owner** of the vineyard. This employer has amazing sensitivity and care for the unemployed. He deals with them so generously.

The structure of the parable

Like the other parables of the Lord Jesus, this parable is in seven "verses". The first and last verses correspond to each other in a parabolic form as do verses 2 & 6 and 3 & 5. Verse 4 has the "punch line" - the centre/focus of the parable.

There are three surprises in verse four

1. Suddenly a steward appears in the story. Why wasn't he part of the story from the start?

2. The owner opts to pay everyone a living wage.

3. The natural and expected order of payment is reversed.

The final "verse" has its own parabolic structure.

So there are seven scenes in an inverted order with the climax in the middle of the parable.

"For the kingdom of heaven is like ..."

verse 1

"... a master of a house who went out early in the morning
to hire labourers for his vineyard.
After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day,
he sent them into his vineyard."

AGREEMENT MADE

verse 2

"And going out about the third hour, he saw
others standing unemployed in the marketplace and he said to them,
'You go into the vineyard too and whatever is right I will give you.'
So they went."

I GIVE JUSTICE

"Going out again about the 6th hour and the 9th hour he did the same."

verse 3

"And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing
and he said to them,
'Why do you stand here idle all day?'
They said to him,
'Because no one has hired us.'
He said to them,
'You go into the vineyard too.' "

ELEVENTH HOUR

verse 4

"And when evening came,
the Lord of the vineyard said to his steward (foreman),
'Call the labourers and pay them the wage
beginning with the last, up to the first! ' "

THE WAGE

verse 5

"And when those hired about the eleventh hour came,
each of them received a denarius."

ELEVENTH HOUR

verse 6

"Now when those hired first came,
they thought they would receive more,
but each of them received a denarius.
And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house
saying, 'These last worked only one hour and you have made them
equal to us who have borne the burden of the day
and the scorching heat.' "

WHERE IS JUSTICE?

verse 7

"But he replied to one of them,
'Mister, I am doing you no wrong (no injustice);
did you not agree with me for a denarius?
Take what belongs to you and go.
I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you.
Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?'
So the last will be first and the first last."

AGREEMENT KEPT

The Interpretation

In this story that the Lord Jesus told, the vineyard owner rather oddly hires workers at five different times in one day and at sunset he pays them all the same wage. Those hired early in the morning complain and the owner replies to their complaints. What is the meaning behind this parable?

By placing this story in its Middle Eastern cultural setting of about the 1st century A.D., we see that the story is filled with questions, surprises and both anger and joy. But as is so often true, the end of the story is missing! Do the complaining employees obey the owner's command and leave with their pay or do they opt for shouting, demanding more or even for violence? We don't know!

The owner of the vineyard needs extra workers. Perhaps the vines need pruning or perhaps it is harvest time. So the owner heads for the special corner of the local village/town market where those who are without regular employment gather each day hoping for a job – any job even just for a day. This custom is still prevalent in Arab countries today. These days the employer usually arrives in an open top truck. There is a great rush towards the truck. The employer says he needs ten men to do grape picking or whatever. The employer may then ask who has experience and choose ten of them. If you could watch this scene you would see the elation of those chosen who clamber up into the truck as well as the quiet desperation and humiliation of those not chosen.

So in the first scene of the story the vineyard owner arrives in the "unemployed corner" of the marketplace. He selects some workers and offers them the standard wage of one denarius for a day's work. The workers accept his proposal and follow the owner to the field. Perhaps they hope there may be more work than they can do in one day. Maybe they would be hired for a few days. Work usually started at 6.00 am - soon after sunrise.

Halfway through the morning – about 9.00 am – the owner returns to the marketplace. He finds other unemployed men who are standing around. They are still hopeful they will be chosen by someone – anyone. If a potential employer comes they run towards him showing how eager they are for work.

The owner makes a second selection but there is no mention of any quote on a pay scale like ¾ of a denarius. The owner only says, "What is just/right I will pay you." The men trust him and accept his terms no doubt very glad that they will have something to feed their families with at the end of the day and also that they have escaped the humiliation of being unemployed. Clearly the owner of the vineyard is a respected member of the community and the day labourers trust him. But why did the owner come again to hire workers?

The vineyard owner was almost certainly a well-organised, experienced owner. He would know well how much work needed to be completed that day and could easily calculate how many workers the task would require. So why does he return to the marketplace every three hours to hire more workers (at 9.00 am, 12 noon, 3.00 pm and 5.00 pm – one hour before sunset)?

All sorts of reasons have been suggested. But one option appears to be the driving force in the vineyard owner's choice – **compassion for the unemployed**. He saw many anxious but eager unemployed men at the beginning of the day and selected some of them. He probably hoped that many of the others waiting for work would soon be hired to work in someone else's vineyard. Three hours later he decided to check to see what had happened to those that he did not employ. On arrival in the village square he found many still waiting and so the early morning procedure was repeated. The owner selected a few to go with him and possibly offered words of encouragement to all the rest that perhaps other owners would be along to hire them. But at noon he wanted to see if this had happened. When he arrived back in the village square there was still a crowd of men whom no one had hired. So he hired more men. By 3.00 pm compassion compelled him to check in the square again. Possibly he hoped it would be empty. The owner was dismayed to find there were still many unemployed workers, so he hired a few more workers, perhaps to reward their courage and patience in continuing to wait there.

Each time the implication is that the hired men will be **justly** paid. The question is, 'What is justice in this sort of situation?' But at this point it is not answered. What is justice for an unemployed man (the breadwinner) eager to work, who does everything in his power to find a job? These men were willing to stand all day long and endure the humiliating glances of the financially secure.

Finally, one hour before sundown, the owner returned to the marketplace perhaps assuming that all the unemployed would have gone home by now for what would be the use of standing there when it was clearly hopeless to find a job that day? But the owner was wrong! There remained some brave men hoping against hope that they would not have the humiliation of returning home to an anxious wife and hungry children with the bad news of no meal that evening after a day of frustration and disappointment. Why had these last men not given up and left? Perhaps this was the reason. When asked, they had a simple answer, "No one has hired us!" So these men were eager to work, willing to work, ready to work, able to work and they wouldn't give up until it was dark.

Interestingly the owner doesn't say to them, "Here, each of you take a denarius and go and buy some food for your families!" He refuses to humiliate them further by giving them "relief". Instead, he gives them the one thing they desperately want – a job. Note that there is no promise to pay them anything and yet they accompany him to the field. Why? I think they sensed his compassion and his desire to give them self-worth in spite of a largely humiliating day.

So by the end of the day there were five groups of men working in the vineyard:

- The first group had "a contract". They were promised a specific amount – one denarius for 12 hours' work
- The 9.00 am group, the 12 noon group and the 3.00 pm group had been promised an unspecified "justice" in the pay scale. They clearly trusted the owner that he would be "just".
- The last group weren't promised anything. They just trusted the owner. The key concept is: payment is according to **faithfulness in opportunities**.

Three big surprises!

1. An estate manager suddenly arrives in the story! Such a person would be on the owner's staff. So why wasn't **he** walking back and forth to the village ten times that day doing the hiring? The manager didn't do much managing. Perhaps he was" managing" the workers while the owner was going back and forth to the village.

2. The owner – in Greek *'Kyrios'* (Lord) – tells the manager, "Call the workers and pay them the wage." This is the precise language of the Greek text. "The wage" is a full day's pay. According to Jewish Law, payment had to be made at sunset (6.00 pm) when the day ended [see Lev. 19:13].

3. Notice the order in which the payments were to be made. Those who came last are paid first and receive a full day's pay! The order of payments was quite deliberately made by the owner who must have had some important reasons for choosing this reversal of the usual procedure. This begs the question – why?

If the estate manager had paid the agreed upon denarius to the first group first, they would have happily received their wages and left, glad they had worked hard and had received a full day's wage. Each group – the 9.00 am, then the 12 noon, the 3.00 pm and finally the 5.00 pm – would have received their one denarius and left. Each group, after the first, would have been more and more delighted! Probably there would not have been any angry shouting around the estate manager's table. So why deliberately cause unnecessary trouble? Obviously the owner wants those who worked all day to see the **grace** that he gives to each of the groups.

It isn't hard to sense the rising tension in the first group hired at 6.00 am, as they watched what was happening with the four other categories of workers. First of all they must have been really shocked. The 'one-hour workers' received a full day's wage! Then they noted that the 'three-hour workers' got the same as the 'one-hour workers'. Then the same thing happened to the 'six-hour workers' and the 'nine-hour workers'. Anxiety turned to anger and then to the expectation of at least a little more than just one denarius after 12 hours of hard manual work. But when they are paid, they discover that what they receive is exactly what they had been promised, but no more!

"Equal pay for equal work" is a many millennium old understanding of justice. But this is not the issue here. This story is about the **overpaid** not the underpaid. The story is about amazing grace that was resented by those who felt they had earned much more than they had received. So the leader of the 'twelve-hour workers' shouts, "We should have received more!" This is **not** the cry of the underpaid. No one in this story is underpaid. The complaint is from the "justly" paid who cannot tolerate grace! They shout angrily, "You have made them equal with us! We worked all day and endured the scorching heat and wind! Give us more!"

So to these market-oriented minds, their worth as human beings is directly related to how much they are paid. But grace is not only amazing it is also **infuriating**!

The owner addresses the spokesman of the angry 'twelve-hour workers' with the word *'hetairos'* which is not the word for 'friend' (*philos*). It is a polite title for a stranger. His answer went something like this:

"You really have no complaint. I have been just, for I have given you what I agreed to pay you and you agreed that it was fair payment for 12 hours work. Now you are free to do what you like with it for it is yours. But I am completely free to do whatever I like with mine! I **chose** to pay all these workers – the 9-hour, the 6-hour, the 3-hour and even the 1-hour workers – a living wage. Now **all of you** will be able to go home to your wives and children and gladly announce that you found work and that you have a full day's pay. I want the workers who have worked shorter hours than you have to have the same joy in their hearts that they can care for their loved ones and have the same money in their pockets. I want your wives and children to be proud of you all.

[The '12-hr workers' weren't infuriated by their sense of injustice. They were the victims of jealousy].

Now you complain that you worked through the heat of the day and this is true! But what do you think I was doing during the heat of the day – enjoying a nap during a long siesta? No, I was on the road from the vineyard to the marketplace and back – 10 journeys. Why? I was trying to demonstrate compassion to others who, like you, needed employment. I could have sent the estate manager to do this, but I did it myself. I went myself to demonstrate solidarity with the men and help alleviate their suffering. Why are you so jealous of them and angry at me? You must understand that I am **just** and I am also **merciful** and **compassionate** because mercy and compassion are part of justice.

So on what basis should the grace I show to others infuriate you? It appears you do not care whether or not they can feed their families and preserve their self-worth as breadwinners. You want to take more for yourselves. I have chosen to give more of myself. You want to be richer at the end of the day. I have chosen to be poorer at the end of the day. Don't try and control me!"

Now with this final speech the story stops! It does not have an ending. It just stops! In several of the parables told by the Lord Jesus the story has no ending! Why? Well we are to move from being a spectator/audience to the story to being a participant in the story. Each of us must finish the story for ourselves in our own situation. Would we still be infuriated or would we understand and appreciate the compassion of the owner?

The final statement of the story is, ***"The last will be first and the first last."*** This is what happened in the story.

The ethics of the parable

There are some very interesting ethical implications that grow out of this story.

- In spite of the discouragement and sense of rejection, the workers in the marketplace eagerly sought to be employed that day using the only method available. The owner's compassion for their need is a model for us all. He finds a way to respect the dignity of the workers and to encourage them rather than short-circuiting their self-reliance. He makes sure that their basic daily needs are met.
- So the owner is offering **a hand up** and not a handout. This is of great importance in any transformational development project or transformational business.
- The owner tries to educate his entire workforce in these ethical principles.

Some of the theology in the parable

Who do the '12-hour workers' represent? For centuries they have been identified as the Pharisees. These people had spent a century or more carefully and scrupulously defining the Law and precisely how it should be obeyed. They knew exactly how to behave 'justly' in every situation. But the Lord Jesus was welcoming into the Kingdom of Heaven those who had not spent their lives keeping the Law. Many had lived their lives as the polar extreme to the Pharisees. Yet the Lord Jesus says they are equally part of the Kingdom! How completely infuriating!

Are the Pharisees the only candidates for the '12-hour workers'? Others think the story is a story for the disciples themselves. They began to follow the Lord Jesus at the beginning of His ministry and perhaps they were infuriated that the Lord Jesus was welcoming newcomers into the group of disciples. Are Peter, James and John equal in the Kingdom to the blind beggar outside Jericho? Remember salvation came to Simeon at the beginning of the life of the Lord Jesus on earth and to the thief who believed at the end.

Others think that the '12-hour complainers' are those who obey the will of God, but also seek to dictate to God what His will should be for others. The story clearly says that they have no such rights.

C. H. Dodd in his book, **The Parables of the Kingdom**, says this, "The point of the story is that the employer, out of sheer generosity and compassion for the unemployed, pays as large a wage to those who have worked for one hour as to those who have worked all day. This is a striking picture of the divine generosity which gives without regard to measures of strict justice…. Such is Jesus retort to the complaints of the legally minded who cavil at Him as the friend of publicans and sinners."

Some Christology in the story

We can note some of the Christology in the story. Landowners in 1st century Palestine were known as what would have been called 'gentlemen farmers' in 18th century England. They hired others to do the work on the land and appointed a steward/estate manager to manage the estate. So in 1st century Palestine the traditional landowner who lived on his land would give his estate manager careful instructions each day in the morning or the night before as to what should be accomplished that day. He would ask for a report to be given to him at the end of the day.

Such 'gentlemen farmers' would never make a trek in person from the farm to the market square and back again five times in one day. That would be the manager's job or the job of some trusted person deputised by him.

So against all expectations of how such owners should behave, this master owner doesn't remain indifferent to the lack of employment of the workers and the social consequences for the unemployed. His compassion leads him to go to the hurting himself and so incarnate his deep concern as he **demonstrates costly love** to the poor.

The Lord Jesus is describing His own ministry! Self-giving takes on the form of offers of very costly love!

A summary of the parable of the compassionate employer

- **Justice:** this is much more than an equal application of the law. From this parable justice includes respect for the dignity of those in need and a deep concern for their welfare.
- **The compassionate employer:** the parable gives an example of an employer who has compassion for the unemployed and who shows amazing sensitivity to both their physical needs and their need for self-respect.
- **The Kingdom is described:** the Kingdom is where costly grace is offered to all who need it.
- **A warning:** the parable gives a picture of those who wish to control the owner's grace and to pressure him into denying grace to the needy who have done their best. But these receive a rebuke, for the first will be last!
- **Christology:** the 'owner' becomes 'the Lord' and he expends extraordinary efforts to go where the needy are. He gives them the offer of salvation.
- **Law and grace:** others thought that God's grace should only be available to 'the righteous' who keep the Law. The Lord Jesus constantly welcomes 'sinners' into fellowship with Himself. God loves equally, with the same love, both 'sinners' and 'the righteous'.
- **The missing ending:** the parable reaches a critical dramatic moment and then stops suddenly. Do the '12-hour workers' stop complaining? We are not told. We are challenged to find where **we** fit in this story. The Lord Jesus comes to us where we live and He loves us as we are.

Conclusion

What opportunities has God given you? I don't know and I'm not asking you for an answer. You must ask yourself this question.

Some are like Dr Billy Graham who has 'worked hard all day long' and is well-known. But there are many workers who have worked quietly and faithfully. They too will get their "denarius". The emphasis is on the sameness of reward on the basis of **faithfulness to opportunity**. Has the Lord called you into His vineyard? The answer is almost certainly 'yes'. Our only concern is that we should do the job He gives us faithfully for according to our faithfulness will be our reward.