

THE STORYTELLER 5: THE PARABLE OF THE WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

SERIES RECAP & INTRO

- Welcome to week five of **THE STORYTELLER**, our series through the parables!
- At the time Jesus shared these parables, the people of Israel had an expectation of what their Messiah would be like. Having grown up reading the Old Testament and living under an oppressive government, the people envisioned a strong political savior, a king who would rescue them from the exhausting, mundane, and tough parts of everyday life.
- Jesus was not who the people had pictured. Neither was the Kingdom of God that Jesus preached. To correct the people's wrong thinking, Jesus taught in parables, short stories that made clear sense to some and struck up key, illuminating questions in others.
- The parables were set in common places listeners could relate to, like farm towns, weddings and banquets, or in relationships between families. This week's and last week's lessons on the Parable of the Talents both involve workers and a landowner.
- Today, we will read the **Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard**. A story that addresses our misnotions about what it means for life to be fair and God to be graceful.

CONTEXT

- Before we read, let's set the context for where/when/to whom Jesus told this parable.
- **WHERE:** Jesus shared the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard while traveling from Galilee, the region of Israel where he did much of his public ministry, to Jerusalem, the city he first entered triumphantly on a donkey and was later crucified in. (Matthew 19:1)
- **WHEN:** While traveling, Jesus encountered a Rich Young Ruler. The man asked Jesus, "what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus challenged him to "go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The man walked away upset. (Matthew 19:16-22)
- In response, Jesus looked to the crowd and emphasized how difficult it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of heaven. He told the onlookers that it's only by the power of God that any person, rich or poor, can be saved. (Matthew 19:23-26)
- **WHO:** The young man's sullen response and Jesus' challenge to go and sell everything sparked a question in **Peter**, one of Jesus' Day 1 disciples who had been present for all of his adult ministry. Following the encounter with the rich young ruler, Peter asked Jesus, "we've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?" (Matthew 19:27)

- Peter and Jesus' other 12 OG disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. They sacrificed time with family, relationships, riches and more. The disciples' decisions contrasted greatly with the Rich Young Ruler, who refused to give up anything for Jesus. What, Peter wondered, would be the disciples' reward for their loyalty and commitment?
- **Question:** *Have you ever done something with the expectation that someone will do something for you in return, regardless of if they agreed to that? Have you heard the phrase, "give to get?" And are you guilty of this? Invite students to share their response with someone near them.*
- In response to Peter, Jesus first assured him that the disciples would have a special role to fill in heaven and that, "everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:28-29)
- Then, Jesus said, "*many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.*" (Matthew 19:30)
- Matthew Ch. 20 opens with the familiar words, "'For the Kingdom of Heaven is like...'" The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is the second part of Jesus' answer to Peter, an elaboration on his final point – that in his kingdom the first are last, and the last first.

BIBLE PASSAGE + ILLUSTRATION : MATTHEW 20:1-16

- **Instructions:** Invite one student to join you wherever you are speaking from, on a stage or in the center of the room. Tell the student you will pay them \$2 to stand on one leg while you read the day's passage to the group. Begin to read through Matthew 20:1-16. Pause at verse 2, invite another student up to stand on one leg (do not mention any reward for their service). Invite up a third student when you finish reading the passage.
- **Question:** *Turn to your neighbor and try to retell the parable in your own words.*
- Return the group's attention to the volunteers on stage. Invite one last student up to stand on one leg. Thank all of the volunteers and give each \$2.
- **Question:** *Ask the illustration participants and non-participants how they felt about all of the people receiving equal rewards? Was it just or unjust? Was it kind? Why or why not?*
- Like in the parable, some people were invited into the task earlier and others joined later, still everyone received an equal gift.
- In the parable, the workers who worked a full shift were upset, they felt forgotten by the landowner. However, the day's work could never be done with just the workers who began the day. The landowner was wise to know he needed more laborers and just in how he paid them. The earliest workers' pride blinded them from seeing the landowner's

choices as an act of **GRACE** towards not just the workers who arrived later in the day, but to them as well.

- **GRACE** is the act of giving someone more than they deserve. By paying the workers a full day's wages no matter how many hours they worked, the landowner honored his agreement with his first workers, blessed the latter ones, and helped ease the load for them all. No one was cut short. Everyone was rewarded fairly, some more than fairly.
- ***From this story, we can learn two lessons on how to respond to GOD'S GRACE at work in our lives and others.***

1. DO NOT RESPOND WITH JEALOUSY. PRACTICE CONTENTMENT.

- When the workers who spent twelve hours saw the others receiving a full day's wages first, they assumed they would receive more. When they later received the same payment, they were jealous of the man's kindness. Their disappointment and envy turned their hearts bitter toward the other workers.
- However, had the full-day workers received their wages first, they may have been content with the full, fair wages they were promised. Now, in comparison to what the other received for less work, the early workers' reward felt small and insufficient.
- ***Question:*** *How do you think you would have felt if you were one of the full-day workers? Do you ever feel like God has not blessed or rewarded you how you expect him to?*
- ***Application:*** *Maybe you've read your Bible or prayed regularly expecting a reward – better grades, more talent, more friends, someone to date, or a better relationship with a parent. When others get what you want you can become jealous and think God's been unfair. But God's love and GRACE is wide enough to cover us all. To each a reward is given. Practice contentment by counting the ways God is actively showing you kindness.*

2. DO NOT RESPOND WITH JUDGEMENT. PRACTICE COMPASSION.

- The full-day workers weren't just jealous of what the other workers received, they felt like they had earned more and were worth more than the others. The earliest workers cast judgement and looked down on the others. They thought they knew better than the landowner to determine how all the workers should be compensated.
- Similarly, you may think you know better than God to decide what some people deserve or don't. You may have passed judgement on others who are coming to know Christ or still sorting out their beliefs, thinking you are due the blessings they have received.
- On the other hand, you may have experienced someone looking down on you or questioning the validity of your faith and the opportunities you may have to share it because of your background, age, or outward appearance.
- ***Application:*** *It is only right for the landowner to determine what to do with his riches. Avoid doing mental, moral math to determine whether your actions, background, or anything else makes you more or less deserving of God's goodness and grace than*

anyone else. We have all fallen short. All people are equal at the foot of the cross. And thankfully, all who believe are given equal identity as children of the King.

→ OUR BIG IDEA: GOD'S GRACE IS SURPRISING AND SUFFICIENT.

- ◆ Jesus closes the parable with the same line from his initial response to Peter, “those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last.”
- ◆ God alone decides how he wants to show grace. His choices may surprise or even disappoint you. Know this, God is working all things together for good. His grace is already sufficient enough to hold us all close and call us children. Practicing contentment and compassion draws us closer to him and one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Have you ever done something with the expectation that someone will do something for you in return, regardless of if they agreed to that?*
- *How do you think you would have felt if you were one of the full-day workers?*
- *How do you think you would have felt if you were a worker who worked just an hour?*
- *What is something about God's grace that still confuses you?*