

## Matthew 20:1-15

You will be interested to know that the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, when run through ChatGPT, can be rendered in Shakespearean style, Memphis blues style, and rap.

My friend Rahul kindly executed this search for me, and I have to say it was not very helpful.

But it was entertaining. The Shakespearean version just goes like this:

Landowner: Good morrow, good sirs! Who will work for me today?

First laborer: I will, sir! What shall be my wage?

Landowner: A denarius, for a day's work.

Second laborer: I, too, will work for you, good sir.

Memphis Blues starts like this:

As the day wore on, the landowner hired more  
To work in his vineyard, until evening's roar  
At noon, at three, and even at five  
He brought them in, to keep the work alive  
But when the day was done, and the work was through  
The landowner paid them, in a way that  
was new  
Each worker got a coin, regardless of time  
From the first to the last, it was all in line

I have some real questions about the sacrifices made for the sake of rhyme. Evening's roar?

And here's rap:

The first were hired at break of dawn  
And toiled away from dusk till morn  
The last were hired  
an hour to go  
But they worked hard and did not slow  
(Outro) So let this story be a lesson to us all  
To not be envious when others receive our call  
For in the end, we all get what we deserve  
And it's not our place to judge and preserve.

So artificial intelligence has not yet made the preacher's job obsolete.

A year and a half ago my daughter got a new job, a very exciting opportunity. At the same time she was hired, the company hired another former teacher, a man her age, to a slightly senior position. She and this man worked closely together until recently he moved to another part of the same company. Thinking that she might make a move of her own, and having built up quite a bit of mutual trust, she asked him how much he made in the first

position. It was a boatload more money. Excessively more. Which she had suspected. And it left her fuming at the company for the disproportionality, at herself for not having negotiated a better deal when she was hired, at the universe for unfairness.

She'll be fine. But this is what happens in our culture when employees are in the dark about what the company pays everybody. We've discovered entrenched patterns of underpaying women and people of color across industries, enabled by secrecy. So when I read today's parable, I am *strongly* motivated to find a meaning that is not about pay or reward, because exploitation stinks. And when I envision the scenario at the end of the day, when the manager pays the latest workers first and the early workers can see what they're getting, and imagine that they themselves must be going to get even more because they worked longer, even though they had agreed on a wage when they were hired . . . well, I have a lot of sympathy for those first-hired.

The scenario is one in which people who need work (income) hang out at the marketplace and wait for an opportunity. There is no indication in the text that the ones who were hired earliest were the most ambitious or industrious. Those who had appeared at the marketplace by the time the landowner made his noon or 5:00 visit may have already worked somewhere earlier in the day, gotten done, and turned up again hoping for a couple hours more. Nor is there any indication that the landowner was under the gun to get a certain amount of work done, that he'd underestimated how much work there was, or any other production-related reason why he'd keep going back and hiring more workers. He just seems to feel like people with nothing to do should be given something to do. And he's super-clear that, having agreed with each laborer on fair compensation, it's his right to be generous.

So I'm going to posit that this is really not about the labor market. The people in the marketplace clearly need work so they can support themselves, but the landowner does not clearly have some well-defined task that has to be completed. He has a place where work can be done, apparently by a limitless number of people, and he has however much it'll take to pay them *at least* the going wage.

The nub of the story seems to be the senior workers' dismay that newcomers got as much reward as they did, despite the difference in how long they'd worked. But, like the manna in the wilderness, when people gathered a lot or a little but everyone turned out to have just enough, this workplace doesn't reward you for effort. It makes sure everyone gets what they need.

Jesus started the story this way: '*For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*' So the *kingdom of heaven* is like a place where there's work for everybody and everybody gets what they need for their work. If standing around in the workplace, not getting hired, is an implicit rejection of your worthiness and makes you feel like nobody needs you, the kingdom of heaven is an invitation from God to discover your value.

I tried to get a discussion going in my class last week. Without going into detail, in response to my dumb question about why religious people seek perfection, one of those guys with a ball cap who sits hunched over in the back of the room and doesn't show any interest in anything ever, said, "Everywhere we go we get evaluated. School, work, sports teams." Of course he's right, and that's why the early laborers in the vineyard are so mad--not because they're getting underpaid, but because they feel like their work has been undervalued.

This parable is difficult for precisely the reason my student articulated: everything we do gets evaluated. But there is no evaluation in this vineyard. The landlord's actions represent what is beyond our comprehension: God's grace, love and power. There is an element of "you reap what you sow" in the gospel, and I've had occasion to comment on Matthew's fondness for outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth. But the overwhelming message of the gospel is that in the kingdom of God we do not get what we *deserve*.

There *is* a vineyard, and there *is* work to be done. But if we are not rewarded for seniority or effort, and if the kingdom is both already *and* not yet, I have to think that the work itself contains the reward. I criticized the megachurch Hillsong last week, and it's like shooting fish in a barrel so I feel a little bad, but let me just point this out: they equated working for the church with working for God's kingdom, and they defined what the tasks were. So it was necessary that the worship service have high production values, be very polished. It was necessary that the pastors have plenty of time to schmooze with celebrities and help the church gain members, so the work of writing sermons and taking care of pastors' children was outsourced to volunteers. It's a structure just ripe for abuse. But what if we don't equate the church with the kingdom? What if we look for ways to embody the kingdom in the world right now, ways that give us joy and are in themselves rewarding, and our church is unpolished but also delightful?

The landowner who keeps returning to the marketplace to look for workers is someone whose vineyard offers a lot of scope for talent. I imagine this landowner as taking in what's going on in the vineyard at 9:00 and thinking, "Hmm, what would it look like if I had fifteen more people here?" and then at noon, thinking, "That was awesome, let me see what fifteen

more will do." Just enjoying the heck out of what every single person brings. And then, delighted with the whole day, paying everybody a day's wages because every single one of them was so splendid. My student is right that most contexts evaluate our performance. But God invites us to bring our whole selves, to come as we are, and to share God's delight in what happens when we all get together.

Let us pray: Generous God, you have promised to open your kingdom to all people, despite their circumstances. Bring us close to you, and help us to make plain the goodness of your generosity. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

**Let us go into the world refreshed by the Holy Spirit and remembering that it is God who is calling us by name. God loves us from the earliest dawn til the darkest dusk—let us go forth enveloped in that love. Amen.**