

Selected Parables in Matthew's Gospel

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Passages: Philippians 1:21–30

Matthew 20:1–16

Let me start off today's sermon by letting off a bit of steam! You see, I have a complaint against the editors of the NIV Bible. In my opinion, they have done us a great disservice by giving us such a stupid title for today's parable. They've called it, "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard". And I say, 'That's stupid!' As a matter of fact, let me widen my complaint to include all of the parables that we've studied over these past three weeks! All three parables have stupid titles! Why do I say this? Why am I so upset?

Think about the Parable of the Lost Sheep. By choosing to name the parable after the Sheep, the NIV has caused us (the readers) to take our eyes off the main character in the story! Think about it—who is the primary actor in the story? It is certainly not the Sheep—it's the Shepherd! The shepherd is the one who leaves the 99 other sheep to go and find the lost one. It's the shepherd who takes great risks in order to re-unify his flock. It's the shepherd who endangers himself in order to bring the lost sheep back home. And because it's the shepherd, not the sheep, who is the main character, the title of the parable should clearly reflect this! It should be 'the Parable of the Good Shepherd'!

Last week's parable was called 'The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant'. Again, I say, 'how ridiculous'! Once again, the NIV has mistakenly chosen a secondary character to be named in the title, and not the primary! Who is the primary character? It's the master! He's the One who owns all things. He's the One who mercifully forgives His servants '70 times 7'. It's the master, not the servant, who is the central figure of the parable. So why doesn't the NIV put the Master in the title? As I understand it, the

parable should be called, 'The Parable of the Incredibly Forgiving and Patiently Merciful Master!'

What about today's parable, which the NIV has foolishly entitled, 'The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard'? What's wrong with that title? Once again, it focuses on the secondary characters—the workers—while the primary character of the parable, the Vineyard Owner, gets no mention! If you think about the parable, who is the One who repeatedly shows up throughout the day to hire the workers, even though that job would be totally beneath his status? Who is the One who mercifully offers work to these unemployed men throughout the day, even though he probably has no more need for workers? And who is the One who, at the end of the day, generously chooses to pay every man equally and magnanimously, even though the law made no such requirement upon him? The answer to each of these questions is clearly the Vineyard Owner! He is the central character of the story! He is the person around whom the entire story revolves!

And that's why I have to complain! I complain because, by giving us the stupid titles that we find in our Bibles, the editors of the NIV have distracted us from the main point of each of these parables. The titles they have given are a hindrance...not a help...towards our understanding of what Jesus is trying to say to His church. This is not a parable about the workers, but about the Unbelievably Generous Owner of the Vineyard!

You see, the reason why these parables need good titles is because, in each parable, the focal point is meant to be God! In fact, that's the only reason why Jesus tells them! **He tells these parables to explain what God is like!** He tells these parables to open our eyes to the Kingdom of Heaven. He wants us to know that we have a "Good Shepherd" who relentlessly looks after His flock. We have a "Forgiving Master" who continually forgives us our sins, even as we forgive those who sin against us. And in today's parable, Jesus wants us to know that we all work for a

“Generous Vineyard Owner”...one who rewards us far and beyond what we might ask or think.

Had the NIV chosen these titles for each of the three parables, they would have allowed us to immediately jump into the story with a greater anticipation of what Jesus was trying to teach us! We would have been prompted to pay attention to God as the central character of each parable...and we would have been more easily astonished at His goodness, mercy, grace and love.

Sadly, bad titles initiate bad thinking. Bad titles mislead the reader to focus on the wrong characters. Bad titles distract us from looking at God!

Now, you may still think that the titles don't really matter, but **there's one more reason** why good titles are so important! You see, the ultimate reason why Jesus focuses our attention on the character of God is to teach us a lesson about the character of the church! **Jesus is calling His church to be like God!**

Remember how, back in chapter 16, Jesus said that He was going to **build His church and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it!**? When He said this, He was literally putting his reputation as a leader on the line. He was saying, in effect, that **His** followers, **His church**, would become such a reflection of God on this earth...a powerful army of men and women who loved, and cared, and were so generous with each other (in the love of God the Father) that the devil himself would have no chance in bringing it down! Not even the gates of hell could prevail against it! In other words, **Jesus has confidence that His church** (under His presence and leadership) **will be able to replicate on earth what God is like in heaven!**

I repeat: In each parable, **the church is being called to be like God!** So...

- If God is a Good Shepherd towards His sheep, then His sheep (the members of the church) must also be good

shepherds towards one another. (“**If your brother sins against you...**”)

- If God is a Forgiving Master towards his servants, then His servants (the members of the church) should also be forgiving towards each other.
- If God is a Generous Vineyard Owner towards His employees, then His employees (the members of the church), must be generous towards each other.

Now, let’s think a little more about this last idea, since it comes from today’s Bible reading. In today’s parable, the Vineyard Owner showed Himself to be extremely generous towards everyone who worked in His vineyard, no matter when they started or how much effort they put in. Even the men who began working late in the day got the exact same wage as the ones who started at the crack of dawn!

So, tell me, **what is Jesus trying to say to His disciples?** As with the other parables, He’s telling them that here is a quality of God’s character that needs to be reflected in them! God’s generosity must become their generosity and God’s equanimity must become their equanimity ... as they grow (in Christ) to be more like God.

Got that? But **why does Jesus need to remind them of this?** (Here’s where it gets interesting!) All you have to do is to look around the Gospel of Matthew a bit and you’ll see that some of Jesus’ longer-standing disciples felt that, because they had been Jesus’ followers far longer than the others, they should receive a greater reward! Go back to their argument in **chapter 18** about “Who is the greatest?” ! Didn’t some of the disciples show a certain superiority to the others? Didn’t they feel a bit more ‘worthy’ of God’s reward? It’s my guess that this probably came out of the fact that they had been around longer than the others!

Of course, **Jesus' parable blows that sort of thinking out of the water!** In the Parable of the Extremely Generous Vineyard Owner, the Vineyard Owner has no favourites; He refuses to play our games! His nature is pure generosity—He goes out throughout the day and He generously helps the unemployed find work! Then, at the end of the day, He generously gives far more to His workers than they deserve; regardless of who they are or when they started to work in His vineyard!

If you look in **chapter 19**, you'll find another situation which, no doubt, stimulated Jesus to tell this parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner'. When a 'the rich young man' came to Jesus asking about eternal life, Jesus invites him to give up his riches and to 'Come' and follow Him! At this point, we're told that the young man turned away from Jesus 'because he had great riches'.

But what follows next is important for our discussion. You see, this little scene with the rich young man generates an interesting discussion amongst the disciples about 'what happens to rich men?' and 'who then can be saved?'. Finally, **in verse 27**, Peter (who was one of the very first disciples) turns to Jesus and says, **"We have left everything to follow you!"** No, who is he talking about? Who is the 'we'? He may be referring to all the disciples, but I get the impression he's really only thinking of himself and his brother, Andrew (and maybe James and John, the sons of Zebedee). You see, not only were they the first disciples, but they left their nets behind in order to follow Jesus. So, Peter says to Jesus, **"We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?"** I get the impression that Peter is pleading for special recognition. He's just like the first workers in the vineyard who complained about their wages. Similarly, Peter is angling for a special reward from Jesus for being the first to go to work in the vineyard.

What does Jesus say? Look at **verses 28–30**.

“I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you (all 12 of you) who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But (Peter) many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.”

Do you see the connection with the Parable of the Exceedingly Generous Vineyard Owner? The point is, there will be equal and ample reward for all God’s children... regardless of when you came to faith...regardless of how much you’ve done in God’s vineyard.

So, let’s apply this parable to us today, by thinking about those of you here who are recent converts to the faith. Does being new to this church or new to the faith relegate you to a back seat? **Let me reassure you that there is no such thing as a second class citizen around here!** You are an equal member of the Body of Christ-- That is the way of God’s Kingdom!

But let’s also expand our thinking a bit here. Historically, the first church began in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The first Christians were Jewish. But soon, the Gospel was spreading out from there to Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Tell me, which of these Christians was more important to God? Did He favour the first ones? Did He think they were more important? Does He have favourites today? Is the Western church more important to God than the church in Pakistan or India or Malaysia?

You see, if God, the Vineyard Owner, has no favourites, why do we? Why do we look to the church in America for all the latest music or church growth techniques? Why don’t we have an acceptance of all people and all cultures in our gatherings? God has no favourites, so why do we so often operate that way? And when the church in Egypt or Iran suffers from persecution, why do we seem as if we don’t care? God has no favourites, so why do we?

Do you realize that there are an estimated 27,000 ‘people groups’ around the world. A ‘people group’ is a group who is bound together by a common nationality, race, tribe or language. According to statistics, there are still almost 7000 people groups in the world who have not yet heard the Gospel! That is, some 2.8 billion people are still waiting for the Vineyard Owner to come and put them to work in His vineyard. God wants them to come in and join us! So why do we refuse to bring His desire to pass? Do we feel as if we’re in a superior position, just because our Western culture responded to the Gospel before theirs? Are we like Peter, insisting that, since we are first, we deserve the rewards of the Kingdom while others don’t? Aren’t all human beings called to be workers in God’s Kingdom? Shouldn’t we offer the reward of the Kingdom to those who have not yet heard the call and who still stand waiting for the Master to come?

According to the parable of the Incredibly Generous Vineyard Owner, His character is meant to become our character! Under Jesus’ leadership, His generosity is meant to become our generosity! Jesus Christ is building His church in the image of His Father...to be a people of intense collaboration, bound together in the harmony of diverse ethnicities and cultures and languages. The church of Jesus Christ is a place of shared life, without preference or privilege for those who may have been around longer. We are all workers in the vineyard of a gracious and generous God. The God who came to earth in Jesus Christ and gave His life to take away our sins now calls us to reflect His goodness, mercy, forgiveness and love outwards to the rest of His creatures...until all of humankind is brought into God’s vineyard, working together for one common reward!

This is surely what Jesus meant when He said, **“I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!”**

(P.S. Be careful with the title headings in the NIV Bible!)

Let’s pray.