



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **The Storyteller: Overcoming Resentment:**

### **The Laborers in the Vineyard**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

**By Dr. Matt Hook**

Once a rich young ruler asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered carefully, and eventually led him to the issue of his wealth and the sacrifices he would have to make if he were to follow God. The young man left in sorrow, because he wasn't ready for such a huge decision. As he left, the disciples began to raise questions. This young man would have been a great candidate for discipleship and eternal life! He had kept all the law. And with that wealth, he had a better than average prospect for God, and he was sincere. Peter asked what was on everybody's minds: "Master, we've left everything to follow you. What will we get in return?"

Jesus explained in the day of judgment that everyone who have made great sacrifices for him will be rewarded a hundred times over, and they will inherit eternal life. But, he said, many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. And then He told His Story of the Laborers in the Vineyard...

NIV Matthew 20:1 *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. 3 "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 7 "Because no one has hired us," they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' 8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

Jesus always throws in a twist. The real twist in this story happens when the day was nearly over, at 5:00, with only an hour of work remaining, he went again to the marketplace and found some potential workers still waiting there, hires them, and pays them a full day's pay for working only one hour.

Those who worked the whole day had to have been pretty excited when they saw what the latecomers got. But they were disappointed. Their pay was just the same as the latecomers! They began to grumble, with good reason. "We've borne the burden and the heat of the day!" They get what we get? It's not fair!

Now, the parables are about the Kingdom of God. So, this parable may be about God's wages, telling us that God doesn't reward like we think. 16 *"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."* He won't reward us

for time served. He won't reward us according to our ability, or according to what other people thought of us, or even according to our success. Whoa. Who does He think He is, anyway? He may measure our work by how much we thought of Him, rather than the opinions of others, or our own reputation. He said, "*Those who honor me, I will honor.*" God may measure based on our giving. That is, not how much we give, but how much we have left.

Or this parable might be a warning to the all-day workers, about the poison of performance-based Christianity. *10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.* This is for people in the church a long time. Because they've avoided certain scandalous sins, they begin to feel God is getting a pretty good deal with them. Instead of rejoicing with those who come in at the last minute, they can begin grumbling. Complaining is one of the greatest ways to remove joy from your life. So you seek out other complainers, and live this adversarial life that's against everybody, rather than live continually humbled and amazed because God is so good. We resent God and think we have to do stuff to earn His love. And we judge the latecomers that they get treated just as graciously as those of us who have worked long and hard. But we need to remember in the face of God's Story, we're all latecomers to God's vineyard. God's grace brought us in, not our stellar resumes. We're not paid according to merit. None of us deserves eternity with God. But He offers it to us.

There may be other economic angles as well in this story. Peter and the others didn't like the story. Peter reminded Jesus how much they'd given up to follow him. And Jesus said, "You'll get back a hundred times what you gave." But He ended with "The last shall be first and the first shall be last."

But there may be one more piece the Storyteller gives us. Did you catch it? The answer is in the late-afternoon conversation between the landowner and the un-hired hands. *6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'* *7 "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered."* He challenges them. "Why have you been standing there all day, doing nothing? Why have you wasted your lives away, so to speak? In a world where there is work to be done, why have you been idle in the marketplace? There better be a good reason if he's to risk hiring them in his vineyard.

The truth is, good people can be unemployed. It's not just lazy people... There are few things that leave a person more demoralized than to realize no one wants to hire you. But as much of a realization that is, there's an eternal truth behind it. "*Because no one has hired us*" represents a waiting world. It is the picture of the boredom, sorrow, and suffering of the millions of people who go through their lives with an almost unceasing emptiness, just trying to cope; while they wait for someone to "hire" them.

I'm not talking just about jobs and the world labor market, though that's serious enough. It's not just jobs, but having a purpose in living. People desperately want to know that life amounts to something; some purpose in their living; a reason to inhabit this planet.

Even "successful people" may have that hunger, because they've discovered what they fought for was not enough. When you're on the quest for economic or academic achievement, you still think "If only I get "that", I'd be happy," rather than empty. There's hardly anything more pathetic than feeling unwanted or "unemployable." It's the kind of mental state that causes a person to withdraw from society, usually because the person feels society has withdrawn from them.

If it's tragic to feel as though no person wants you, then think about the abyss some people face that life itself doesn't want you. Others rush by, apparently with an assignment and a purpose in living. But you stand waiting. Wondering if ever life will say to you "I have a place for you. Vast numbers of people stand in life's marketplace all day, all the days of their lives, and life doesn't seem to care. It passes them by. They wait all morning, through high school and college, but no call comes. They wait in the heat and clamor of midday, but no call comes. Soon, it's mid-afternoon, and still nothing. Late in the day you ask "How have you spent your life?" And they answer, "I've been waiting all my life in the marketplace, but no one has hired me."

You see the seriousness of it when you think about how many people in our world always seem to be seeking an escape from life, from standing all day in the marketplace. Drugs, including alcohol, other kinds of frantic running around, as if they hope to find their worth. So many people take their own lives each year. And there are accepted drugs. you might be content with more refined and socially accepted drugs—magazines, videos and dvds, or following the latest scandal, or cards, (solitaire), other computer games, a bit of gambling, TV, and everything else we come up with to numb the pain of boredom and the emptiness of life. (Last week we called them thorns). The fact is, I must have God, a God whom I can know, and love, and live for. I must find a meaning in life.

This is the issue for those workers the landowner found late in the day. They'd been waiting all day, but no one had hired them. Look on them with compassion and not resentment. And think about how many people may be living with the pain of boredom and the emptiness of life.

I was fortunate to become a Christian when I was a kid. I was hired early in the morning. In junior high it moved me onto a different path; not without plenty of problems. But I realized I was connected. I had a sense that my story was a tiny subplot in God's great story. Your life is the same: a part of God's great story. And if people mess with you, and you're living out God's story for you, they don't know who they're messing with! After all, God wants to hire you! He has good work in His vineyard, with His family, for you and me!

So how could I be bitter about those who have waited all day in the marketplace, if at the end of the day they are blessed with an eternity as good as mine? When I stand before the Great Landowner as He passes out the silver pieces of eternity, maybe I'd better say "give some of mine to this other guy who didn't come to faith in Christ until he was 60...and to that woman who became a believer only when she was dying. I've been employed all day long. God gave me a great purpose: to be His. Give them part of mine. They stood for so long waiting to be hired..."

So for now, let's be headhunters. Let's look around the marketplace of life and see if, just maybe, we can lead somebody who's waiting there to a place where there's good work to do. Do people even know God wants them? That God wants to give them good work to do for His Kingdom? We stand as God's hiring agents. Don't waste so much energy on medicating yourself while you wait to do something meaningful! There's meaning to be had, right now! Come quick to this vineyard—God's doing some great work, and he wants your help! Amen!

\* The idea of the Un-hired Hand comes from "Parables from the Back Side" by J. Ellsworth Kalas.