

James 1:2-12

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,
3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.
4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.
6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.
7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.
8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.
9 Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.
10 But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower.
11 For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.
12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Matthew 20:1-16

'For the kingdom of heaven is *like a landowner* who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.
2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.
3 'About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the market-place 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 noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.
6 About five in the afternoon 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 five in the afternoon 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 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, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?"
14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the one 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.'

The workers in the vineyard

James 1:2-12; Matthew 20:1-16

This is the next parable in our series, the workers in the vineyard. And it's one of a number which explain what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. I remember as a child I used to irritate my father intensely when he would explain something, and I would say "yes, but what like?". And he would give me a bit more explanation and I'd just say again "But what like Dad?".

I think Jesus probably felt the same as my dad about this, and so we get told repeatedly what the kingdom of Heaven is like. Because actually we are really not very good at grasping it. We actually spend a lot of our time like the workers in the vineyard who turned up early in the morning for work. We are very prone to feeling that we're entitled to our place in the world.

James says in his letter that we must always be asking for wisdom, because in fact God, unlike my Dad, does not get impatient with answering.

Our faith will be tested, but if we do nothing else we must persevere with it. So we keep looking at the words of scripture, and asking God to show us more and deeper things. But then we must believe that he will. So this is why we pray before preaching. (PRAY!) This parable is brilliant but it's also a bit hard hitting. You may not like some of the implications, but that's intentional. And at the same time it's good news, if we take it on board.

What comes out again and again in the gospels is that the Kingdom of God has very different principles to that of the world and many of the people around us. And actually if we look at ourselves honestly, sometimes very different principles to what we hold as believers. If we're going to follow Jesus seriously, rather than see him as just part of what we inevitably have to hear as churchgoers, then what he teaches has to come much more into the heart of who we are as people, how we think and how we act out of who we are.

Look at two details of this story that are easy to miss.

Firstly, what is the kingdom of heaven like?

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.

It's like the landowner. Forget the rest of it for the moment. *It's like the landowner.* So this parable like some of our others is mistitled. It's the parable not of the workers in the vineyard, but of the landowner, who in Jesus' mind is obviously God. It's him and not, to start with, the workers, who we need to focus on.

So it should be **the parable of the compassionate employer.** I'll explain why.

Later in the story we learn that there's a foreman, or a manager, but the Landowner does all the work himself. He goes out to hire the workers at 6 in the morning and agrees a standard day's pay, one denarius. Then he goes out again at 9 to find people hanging around in the market place hoping to get work.

He gives them jobs on the spot. Then he does this again at noon. And then again at 3. And then again at 5. Each time searching out men in need of work. But from nine onwards he tells them he will pay them, not a specific amount, but ***what is right***. By 5pm he's wondering why they are still hanging around unemployed. "*Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?*"

"Because no one has hired us," But even this time he gives them work. And at this stage the manager appears. So the first question is why does the owner do all the legwork himself when he has staff to do it for him?

It's because he is concerned that whoever it might be they should have a day's work, for their own self belief, for their families sake. He has compassion which makes him go way further than he needs to. After all he has staff!

Secondly the workers are all given the same pay, but in a way that provokes them to protest about it.

The order is given to pay the men employed for one hour at 5pm *first* and pay them for a full day, one denarius, and then to work backwards to the earliest arrivals. As this plays out it becomes obvious to all of them that although they naturally *expect* to get more according to the hours they have sweated for in the heat, they *all get the same, a full day's pay*. So those who agreed a fee are very annoyed that the others are paid what the owner sees as right, exactly the same as them, a day's pay.

Surely this is not fair?

So it's a parable about the difference between entitlement, what we think we deserve, and grace. What is right in God's eyes.

The world today hasn't really changed. Many workers have zero hour contracts, and never know when their next job will be. The commentary I read about this parable mentions that in Jerusalem *today* people congregate near the Damascus Gate in the hope of someone coming past and offering them work. And actually I know this happens in the UK too.

So we all recognise the comparison being made, but now we're talking about how the Kingdom of God is radically different from the world. In the parable Jesus is asking the question, Is God Fair? The landowner says "Are you envious because I'm generous?". And then Jesus ends with another challenge to the status quo: *the last will be first, and the first will be last*. Although we approve all this when we hear it, I don't think we really get the full implication of what it means, because it directly challenges what I would call our entitlement. The fact that despite all the things we say about serving others, we feel that actually we're deserving of our position, of what we have achieved by our hard work, of who we are in the world. Why should we feel bad about it? Our credit driven society means we can have everything we feel entitled to without waiting. This is a massive political issue today. The problem is, by the same token we unfortunately also deserve the fallout from our wrongdoing! Who do we see as less deserving than ourselves, if we're honest? Who do you judge inferior in some way?

Particularly amongst Christians when we're told we are 'made righteous by our faith' there is a great temptation to judge others. But again I repeat we're being shown here that God is full of justice, mercy, compassion, and above all grace. And so until the last available minute his passion is to offer salvation to all people, but *not* on the basis of what they do or don't deserve.

I might say "oh but I've been a Christian for 47 years, I've worked for the church, I've done all this preaching" or whatever. I must be high on the list. But look at this conversation, on the cross as Jesus dies: *39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' 42 Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' 43 Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'* So how is it that someone who has lived to almost the very last moment a life of crime and admits it, is welcomed into paradise by the one who has done nothing wrong? Is that fair? Well, what he does is, he turns to Jesus and expresses faith. He recognises who Jesus really is.

Are we envious because God is generous? Fairness is not a consideration. This is grace. The last shall be first. We really must take it on board that with God there is hope for *all* people. This is the God we worship. Amen.