

Back To School: What Some Men Can Never Have

A Sermon by Pastor Harlen Rife

Psalm 105:37-45

September 20, 2026

Matthew 20:1-16

This is the second sermon in my, “Back to School,” series. We’re following the lectionary and, each week, we’re looking at another teaching moment with Jesus. This week’s lesson builds on what we talked about last week. We live in a competitive world. There is a temptation to judge ourselves through comparison to our neighbors. Last week’s scriptures reminded us to keep our eyes on our own paper. Our faith life is focused on being better than our past selves, not our fellow Christians. Our faith life is focused on drawing closer to God not getting ahead of our neighbor. It’s not a zero sum game where my success requires your failure. On the contrary, we work together so we can all grow in faith and faithfulness to God. That can be an especially tough lesson when it comes to money.

It’s a commonly held belief that Jesus preached about money more than other topic. That’s not exactly true, but it is rooted in the truth that Jesus talked about money and used financial allegories frequently in his public ministry. You can’t talk about “lessons from Jesus,” without sometimes talking about money. Our gospel lesson today is a classic example. Jesus uses a parable about workers and wages to teach a valuable truth about our spiritual lives. So, as we continue this, “back to school,” series, let’s gather around Jesus’ feet for story time. This comes from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 20:

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard.”’

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, “Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But he replied to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

In the 2001 animated film, Shrek, the title character famously said, “ogres are like onions -- they have layers.” The same is true for parables. They have different layers to peel apart, and with this parable, I’d like to take a look at two different layers. Let’s start with the surface-level. This is a story about money. What if we look at through that lens? In this story, a manager hires workers for his vineyard. Some join

in the morning, others throughout the day, and still others join right before quitting time. At the end of the day, they all get a full day's wage. This makes some of the workers angry because they believed they should get more pay for more work.

I think we should avoid being too hard on those workers. A lot of us would feel the same. The wage offered is fair for a day's work, but it seems less fair when we see others who didn't work has long get the same amount. Our economic system, our idea of fairness, is shaped by that idea. However, in this parable, Jesus offers another perspective. He says those workers got a fair wage, and the other workers received generosity. It's not that they were paid more per hour, its that everyone who worked in that field got what they needed to live. The fact that you have what you need doesn't change, just because someone else got what they need, too.

That's not how our economic system generally works. We have structured your economy into something that more closely resembles a zero-sum-game. Money is valuable because it is scarce. If we gave everyone a bunch of money, the value would disappear in inflation. For me to be rich, someone else has to be poor. My house is only valuable because not everyone can easily find housing. If the housing market was flooded with cheap, safe, reliable housing, my investment would evaporate. My house is only valuable because someone else is housing insecure. The workers in this story have a scarcity mindset. If we get the same wage for less hours, then my time was worth less than my neighbors time. Jesus has an attitude of abundance -- everyone should have what they need.

That attitude of scarcity is a hard thing to shake. It changes the way you think. Growing up, my kids were often praised for how readily they shared things like candy. I wasn't surprised. We were never short of candy. They would get their daily allotment whether they shared or not. Kids who grow up with only the bare necessities might find it harder to share, and who could blame them?

There's a famous psychological experiment about this. They left kids alone in a room with a marshmallow. They told them, "I'm going to step out for two minutes. If you can resist eating the marshmallow for those two minutes, I will give you two more." The choice was clear. One marshmallow now, or three marshmallows in two minutes. Some kids ate the marshmallow and some waited. The statistical difference was poverty. Kids who grew up without took the marshmallow immediately. Those who grew up in plenty would wait. The kids who grew up in scarcity learned to take good things immediately because promises about later don't always come true. That can be a hard lesson to shake even when your circumstances change.

One of my pastor friends talked about this. He grew up in an unstable home with a lot of financial scarcity. Now, he and his wife are happily employed and enjoying a middle-class life. However, he said some of those patterns from childhood are hard to break. He says that whenever there's a little windfall -- a tax refund, a bonus, etc. -- he has an impulse to spend it immediately on something frivolous. You'd think people living in poverty would put stuff away for a rainy day, but in fact, every day was rainy. Some urgent and unexciting need was always right around the corner and if you didn't spend this money on something fun immediately, it would disappear forever. Years later, when he has a windfall, he has to quietly remind himself that isn't necessary. It shows how that attitude of scarcity can hold you.

I wonder if the workers in Jesus' parable had grown up in an environment like that. They wanted their bonus, they wanted their fair share, they wanted more than the other people got. This wasn't because they were cruel, but because they had incorporated that attitude of scarcity and competition that shape the economy around us. It's hard to break out of that attitude but some do.

One example that springs to mind is the late, great Dolly Parton. I don't have to tell you all the details of her life story. You already knew her parents had many children at a very young age and struggled to see them all clothed and fed. You might think someone who grew up in that environment would want to accrue as much wealth as possible. Who could blame them? When you know true poverty, you want to get as far away from it as you can. If you're ten million dollars away, it must be tempting to think, "I'd be a lot more comfortable if I was twenty million away." That wasn't Dolly's mindset. She made a moral decision that she did not want to become a billionaire. In a world with such poverty, no one should have that much money. \$900 million is more than enough to see her entire extended family fed, housed, educated, medicated, and happy for generations. So, she decided that everything she made above that would go to others in need. You can debate the figure -- should it be higher or lower -- but I'm just impressed that she had a number at all.

It reminds me of another good story from Kurt Vonnegut. He and his fellow author, Joseph Heller, were invited to attend a party hosted by a hedge fund manager on New York's elite Shelter Island. Looking at the obvious wealth on display, Vonnegut pointed out to Heller that their host probably made more money in a day than Heller's *Catch-22* made in its entire printing run. Heller responded, "I have something that this man will never have." Vonnegut asked what that was and Heller explained, "the knowledge that I have enough."

When it comes to the money layer of this parable, I think that's what Jesus is teaching us. The workers are worried about whether they should have been paid more than their peers. Jesus encourages them to ask what is enough and to imagine a world where everyone has that. That's an important question at this layer, but it's also one we should bring to the next layer of this parable.

Jesus is speaking about money, but he is also talking about salvation. In some ways, this parable is a good companion to the story of the thief on the cross. You remember that, as Jesus is being crucified, a thief dying on the next cross asks for salvation. Jesus promises him, "surely this day, you will be with me in paradise." Theologically, we take this to mean it is never too late to repent. The person who comes to Jesus on their deathbed receives the same salvation as the life-long Christian. That teaching often meets a lot of resistance. Like the workers in the vineyard folks say, "I've been working at this faith thing my whole life, how can he or she show up at the very end and get the same reward?" Like the vineyard owner, Jesus says we're getting eternal salvation -- everything we could ever need -- why are we then complaining if he chooses to be generous to somebody else? How could anyone be rewarded more than that? Do longtime members get better seats in heaven?

I hold onto this passage for another reason. I'm a millennial and that is a theologically diverse generation. I have a lot of friends who are adherents of other faiths, and I have a lot of friends who are adherents of no faith. How am I supposed to interact with these friends, family, and neighbors? It's hard to be friends with someone when your faith teaches you they're going to hell. It's hard to even witness your faith to others when it's done under the cloud of that threat. So, here's my personal understanding. I want to be clear, this is an area where my personal theology deviates from the stated position of the United Methodist Church. I like to imagine that I will run into some of those people in the Kingdom.

In this parable, Jesus made two things clear. First, God always delivers what God has promised. Second, it is God's right to be generous beyond what was promised whenever God wants to. God has promised that all those who believe in Jesus Christ, repent of their sin, and seek forgiveness in his name will receive eternal

life. God will be faithful to that promise. It is my hope, it is my prayer, that God will scandalize church folks like us by choosing to be generous beyond what has been promised. I hope that when I get there, the Kingdom will be full of scandalized religious folks asking why others received good wages.

People ask me what is the point of evangelism with such a hope? What is the point of the cross. None of this would be possible without the cross. And, in Evangelism, we offer assurance. Why live in uncertainty about your salvation when you can know? In evangelism we offer relationship. Why wait to meet Jesus when you die when you can know him here and now? When I think of evangelism, my question is how can you inspire love with threats? Rather, when I meet someone of a different faith or of no faith, I can look them in the eye and say, I honestly hope I see you in the Kingdom. And then, the conversation is about bringing the Kingdom to the here and now. That is not the stated position of our denomination, but it's the way I have found to live into my calling.

This is why Jesus' parable is so important. On the surface level, he wants to inspire us to think beyond the attitude of scarcity and competition that shape our economic life. On the spiritual level, he warns us that, when it comes to the Kingdom, we have to leave that kind of thinking at the door. There is a wideness in God's mercy. There is enough salvation to go around. You going to heaven doesn't mean somebody else has to go to hell. It's not about when you got here, or how much you did, it's about what you need. Everybody needs the grace of God and God's grace is enough for everybody. I do not know how the final judgment will go. Thankfully, it's not up to me. But as I seek to live and work into faith in this lifetime, I'm pinning my hope not in scarcity and competition, but on the abundant grace of God. **Amen.**