

Sermon 13 September 2026 Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Galatians 6:7-10 Matthew 20:1-16

This parable describes the kind of thing that frequently happened at certain times in Palestine. If the grape harvest was not gathered in before the rains broke, then it was ruined. So any worker was welcome, even if he could give only an hour's work.

The pay was low, as in very low. The men who were standing in the marketplace were not street-corner idlers, lazing away their time. The marketplace was the equivalent of the labour exchange. The fact that some of them were still waiting around at 5 o'clock is proof of how much they wanted the work. *'About five in the afternoon the landowner went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long?" "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."'* Matthew 20:6-7.

These men were hired labourers. They were the lowest class of workers and life for them was precarious. Slaves and servants were regarded as being at least to some extent attached to the family; they were within the group; their fortunes were tied to the fortunes of the family, but they would never be in danger of starvation in normal times. It was very different for hired workers. They were ultimately at the mercy of chance employment. Their pay was minimal. If they were unemployed for a day, their family would go hungry.

So what is Jesus trying to tell us in this parable? To answer that, we need to answer the question – Who do the full-time workers and the part-time workers represent?

The part-time workers were the sinners and outcasts of the day. They were the people who took the teaching of Jesus seriously and transformed their lives. They were like the thief on the cross who repented at the last minute and was saved. They were people like the prodigal son who repented after leaving home and was welcomed back by his father.

The full-time workers, on the other hand, were people like the Pharisees, who saw themselves as the chosen people and looked down on the sinners and outcasts who were embraced by Jesus. They were like the elder brother of the prodigal son who became angry and resentful when his brother repented and was welcomed back by his father.

The full-time workers were resentful that the part-time workers were being treated as equals to them. Jesus is saying, 'Wait a minute, where is your love for your fellow man? In God's kingdom, everyone is equal.'

So there are two messages here. Firstly, there is one of humility. No one should regard themselves as being above or better than others, and if we do, we will be put down a peg. That is encapsulated in the last verse, *'So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'* Matthew 20:16.

The second message, very much aligned with the first, concerns our loving attitude to others. To be a genuine Christian, we need to ensure that our priority lies not with our own well-being but the well-being of others. Our prime concern must be how can I improve the lot of others through what I do? This should be our mission in life – to touch the lives of others through gestures of kindness and thoughtfulness. I refer to our first reading: *'Let us not grow weary of doing what is right. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.'* Galatians 6:9-10. Let me tell you a story of how one person found his mission.

It is the story of Johnny the bagger. Johnny had Down Syndrome and he worked at a grocery supermarket. One day, Johnny went to a training event led by a speaker named Barbara Glantz. Barbara was speaking on how people can make a difference. She described how every interaction with another person is a chance to bless someone's life. She talked about how important it is to look for those moments. She placed on the wall posters with inspiring sayings.

Johnny had an idea. He decided that every night when he came home from work he would find a 'thought for the day' for his next shift. It would be something positive, some reminder of how much people matter, or how many blessings we are surrounded by.

Every night, his dad would help him enter the sayings several times on a page on the computer, then he would print off 50 pages. He then would take a pair of scissors and carefully cut out 300 copies and sign every one.

Johnny put the stack of pages next to him while he worked. Each time he finished bagging someone's groceries, he would put his saying on top of the last bag. Then he would look at the person straight in the eye and say, 'I've put a saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming here.'

After about a month, an amazing thing was happening at the supermarket. The line at Johnny's checkout was three times longer than anyone else's. The manager got on the loudspeaker to get more checkout lines moving, but he couldn't get any of his customers to move. They said, 'It's ok. We'll wait. We want to be in Johnny's line.'

A few months later, the whole shopping centre was transformed because every shop initiated little gestures that impacted on their customers in a very positive way, gestures that made them feel good and special. The shopping centre was inundated with customers and business boomed. And all this happened through the initiative of Johnny the bagger.

What Johnny did was not rocket science. He didn't offer super gifts but he cared and he found a way to use his job to make a difference in the lives of others. It'd about motive, isn't it? If our motives are aligned with our Christian faith, our Christian ethics, then we will make a difference for the good.

So the message for us is that wherever we are, whatever we may be doing, we must live in a way that brings credit to the title of Christian. In the end, it is simply doing what Christ calls us to do, and in doing so, we cement our relationship with him.

Let us remind ourselves as to just why we have built a community centre along with our new church. It is so that as a church we can both involve ourselves with and provide something for our local community.

Just coming back to the parable of the vineyard workers. This parable invites us to ask ourselves about our own attitude towards our needy brothers and sisters. Are we so wrapped up in our own efforts to make a living that we forget about the needs of others? The full-time workers begrudged the gesture of the owner in paying a full wage to the part-time workers, those who were struggling. Let us make sure we don't adopt the same attitude.

I want to finish by emphasising a point we have frequently made. It is in reaching out to others, it is in giving that we find fulfilment and gratification. American actress, Katie Cassidy, said, *'To me giving back is so important. It makes others feel good, which in turn makes me feel good.'* Let me conclude with another story.

Author Geraldine Marshall says that one of her fondest memories of a birthday is not one of her own birthdays but one of her father's. On that particular day, her father gave her a beautiful stuffed rabbit. Geraldine was bubbling with joy. Finally, after she had calmed down, Geraldine said to her father, 'But Daddy, it's your birthday, not mine. I should be giving you a present.' Her father gave her a big hug and said, 'You have given me a present, the most beautiful present a daughter could give. It is seeing the joy and happiness that my gift has brought you.'

Geraldine still has that stuffed rabbit. But she says the greatest gift her father gave that day was not the stuffed rabbit but an insight into the joy of giving.

I remind you again of what Winston Churchill said, *'We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.'* And the last word goes to Paul in his first letter to Timothy: *'Tell those who have plenty they should give generously to those in need. By doing this, they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may take hold of real life.'* 1 Timothy 6:18-19.