
The Laborers in the Vineyard

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here is something you maybe never noticed before: In the Gospel of Matthew, it is never a good thing to be called “friend”. For instance, the religious leaders one day accused Jesus of being a drunk, a glutton, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners; and they weren’t being nice when they said that. At the end of Matthew, when Jesus is approached in the Garden by the traitor Judas, Jesus says to him: Do what you came to do, friend; and in between those two instances, there are two parables that have a negative use of friend: The wedding banquet, where a certain friend is asked how he got in without a wedding garment, and then again in the parable we are looking at on this episode of *Groundwork*, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. When one hard-laboring worker complains that the vineyard owner is unfair, the owner says: Am I being unfair to you, friend? Well, in Matthew, “friend” is not friendly; but what caused that complaint in that parable of Jesus’? What was the apparent unfairness? Let’s find out. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, here we are on program number three of a seven-part series on the parables of Jesus. In the first program, we looked at the parable of the sower, which is a parable about the kingdom; in the last program, we looked at parables of the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure hidden in the field, and the pearl of great price; that was also a parable about the kingdom. Now we are going to have a couple programs on parables of grace.

DAVE BAST

Right; grace, that great Bible word that...it is an even greater thing to experience, but for many of us, we pay lip service to grace, but we don’t really think or live into grace, and that is the point of the parables that Jesus is going to tell. There are a number of them; we are going to look at two; but we have to see this, I think, Scott, against the backdrop of how most people in Jesus’ day thought about salvation. Frankly, in our day and in every day, it is the most common view as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you just said that, Dave, that we will see in the course of this program that all of us, I think, still struggle with this; but it certainly was a struggle in Jesus’ day, where over time there was the belief that if you were going to be saved, you had to be a very devout Jew of the Pharisee or the Sadducee variety. You had to keep the Law as perfectly as possible over the long haul. It is all about totaling up merit points and rewards for good behavior; and so, in Jesus’ day people would say: Well, what is the difference between me as a saved person and my neighbor who isn’t saved? The difference is that I keep the Law and he doesn’t. It is as simple as that. I am working my way to heaven on the installment plan. God grades on the curve and I am going to stay ahead of the curve. Basically, Dave, the attitude comes down to the bad question asked by the rich young ruler in a different passage: Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

DAVE BAST

And the answer is all about pluses and minuses in most peoples' minds: Do you have enough on the plus side to outweigh what is on the minus side? It is like being on a team, you know? The team sometimes says: Oh, we are really family here. You will often hear people talk that way...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But just go 0 for 30 sometime and see how that family thing works out. No; teams are performance based, and you either perform or you don't. You are off the team, and that is kind of how many people think of salvation as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, if we base things on the economics of this world and what works and what doesn't work, that is exactly how we will think, right? I mean, nice guys finish last. You have to work hard to get ahead. That is kind of how the world works, but when it comes to salvation, Jesus says no to all of that, and he does that through some parables, including this one in Matthew 20:

¹For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. ³About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, "You also go and work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right," and so they went. ⁵And he went out again about noon, and about three in the afternoon, and he did the same thing. ⁶And 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 doing nothing?" ⁷"Because no one hired us," they answered. He said to them, "You also go and work in my vineyard."

DAVE BAST

⁸When 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." ⁹The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more, but each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When 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." ¹³But he answered one of them, "I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?" ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money, or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶So the last will be first and the first will be last."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is, front and center here is exactly what the one worker complains about, and that is that whole sense of unfairness; and you know, if we have children we know that one thing you never have to teach your child...or if you think back to your own childhood, whether you have children or not...one thing nobody ever had to teach you was sort of this innate sense of what is fair and unfair, right? We start counting things almost immediately. Grandma gave Billy eight M&Ms; she gave me six. That's not fair.

DAVE BAST

We have a keen detector of anything that doesn't seem fair...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right.

DAVE BAST

Especially if we are the ones who are getting the short end of the stick.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We do not exactly grow out of this either, because there are plenty of adults in the world who scrutinize everything that happens at work: I have worked for the company three years longer than Jim and Jim's office is bigger than mine by three square feet. That is not fair! We are always calculating, and that is sort of the economics of the world.

DAVE BAST

Well incidentally, that is one of the reasons we have to keep salaries secret in any organization, so nobody knows what anyone else is making. In one sense, that is what this story is about; at least superficially it seems to be about economics and fairness, but of course, the reality goes much deeper than that—there is a vastly deeper meaning in this parable of grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and maybe we should say before we get to that and get to the spiritual meaning of this story, I think we should say that although Jesus is going to tell us in this parable that the economics of salvation are not the economics of the world, I think we should say that there are certain things in the world that are unjust and inequitable. We have often talked about men and women; women get paid less for doing the exact same job. If a woman says about that, that's not fair, she is right...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a just claim. Jesus is overturning our normal way of thinking, but he is not overturning a larger sense of justice in the world.

DAVE BAST

And it is important to say this, I think, too, especially with the parables, because it is easy with a story to come away with a false application and kind of take a superficial reading or hearing of it. So, Jesus is not justifying unfairness here...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He is not justifying unequal pay or any of the rest. That is not the point he is trying to make. It is a point about grace. We have said these are parables of grace. In just a moment, as we go on, we want to dig deeper into the story and find out just exactly what is the point that he is trying to make.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we just read the parable of the laborers in the vineyard from Matthew Chapter 20. Probably everybody in Jesus' day knew what a vineyard looks like...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Probably most people were familiar with the fact that when the grapes are ready they are ready, and you cannot let them stay on the vine too long; and so, the premise of this story is: There is this man with a very big vineyard and the grapes are bursting with juice, and maybe it is going to rain tomorrow, so we have to get this vineyard harvested and we have to do it in a day...that is the setup.

DAVE BAST

Right; also familiar to everybody would have been the sight of day laborers who were hoping to be hired. People lived day by day, and a denarius was the fair compensation at that time for a day's work. That was the standard; so, a denarius was like a day's pay, and the owner of the vineyard went into the town square or the village gate or wherever the place was where these people congregated, and he goes out at daybreak because there is an urgency, as you said, to the harvest. Maybe it is going to rain tomorrow; maybe he had a forecast; maybe the grapes were ready and it was time. So, he goes out at daybreak and there are people there. The eager beavers are all there at six in the morning. They are waiting to be hired, and they are signed on and he forms a crew.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and he says: A denarius apiece. You work for me today in my vineyard I will pay you a denarius. So, it is six o'clock in the morning...

DAVE BAST

And interestingly, this verse: I will pay you whatever is right, he says. So, okay, that is the premise. The pay is going to be right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the story flips back and forth between the vineyard and the marketplace—the village square; and apparently, the people who are waiting to work are coming into the village square all day. So, we start at six in the morning. There are a bunch of eager beavers there. He hires them for the whole day. Three hours later he is kind of looking at the progress and saying: Not quick enough, not quick enough. I am not going to get this done; so he goes back at nine in the morning, finds a few more people standing there looking like they are eager to work, so he hires them and says: I will pay you whatever is right. Still not happy at noon, still not happy at three in the afternoon; so, every three hours he goes back and finds some more willing workers and keeps hiring more.

DAVE BAST

Right. It is hard not to wonder and try to color in some of the detail. I mean, what are the people doing at nine? I mean, the day starts at six. Were they late sleepers? And what about the people in the afternoon—three, and even five p.m.—what were they doing?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; I mean, you have this sense that the people that he hired at 5 p.m.—so now we are talking about almost an hour before quitting time...

DAVE BAST

Bottom of the barrel...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he kind of says, you know...he even says to them, you know: What have you been doing standing around the square all day doing nothing? And you know, you kind of picture some ne'er-do-wells who are kind of on the far edges. They are kind of tucked under some awnings, maybe sipping beverages sheathed in suspicious looking brown paper bags. They are not that eager to work. They were not jumping to their feet every time this guy came at nine, twelve, three. You know, they are just kind of sitting around not doing much, and the implication is maybe they are a little bit lazy or whatever, because he says to them, you know: Why haven't you been doing anything all day? And they say: Well, nobody hired us.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the reason is because you have kind of been hiding in the shadows; and so, finally he says: Look, there is an hour to go, why don't you work for me? And they say: All right. A little hard work never hurt anybody, and that is what they are going to do.

DAVE BAST

At least they go. At least they go! And then comes the punch line, and the punch line comes when he tells his foreman to pay off the whole workforce, and very important little detail...he says to the foreman: I want you to start with the last hired and wait for the first; because as soon as they get their denarius they are going to go off and hit the local tavern.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if he had paid the six a.m. hired folks first, this parable would have no meaning at all...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because they never would have seen...

DAVE BAST

They would have disappeared, right. So, the whole point is set up by paying the latecomers first, and as he goes down the line, you know, these six a.m. people are saying: Whoa, wait a minute! They get a denarius? What does that mean for us?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Maybe it is a denarius an hour...maybe we are going to get twelve! Boy, that would be bringing home the bacon that night; I mean, what a wonderful thing. So, they are calculating on the economics of the world, as I suppose most of us would do if we were in a comparable, real-life situation, and they are just figuring, well, if you work for an hour and you were sitting around drinking cheap wine all day and you get a denarius, those of us who have been under the heat of the sun right through the noon hour of the day for twelve hours, we are going to get more; but of course, they don't. Everybody gets a denarius—twelve-hour workers, nine, six, three, one—all the same; and the cry goes up: Unfair! Not fair.

DAVE BAST

In a way, they certainly seem to have a point, don't they?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Although they were promised only a denarius at 6 a.m.

DAVE BAST

That is also true. So, they got what they were promised, but it was the same as people who “didn’t earn it”; and maybe that is what Jesus wants us to think about as we think about the spiritual meaning of this...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And apply it to God’s grace and our salvation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in the parable, if the vineyard owner is essentially God or Jesus, when the vineyard owner hears the cry of unfair, he says: Look, I am not cheating you. You are getting exactly what you were promised. Don’t despise my generosity. You know, there is almost a sense in which this owner is saying: This is kind of fun, you know, to reward people, and I can pay whatever I want. So, don’t despise my generosity. We will talk more about that in the next segment of this program, as to what that means, but that is his response: Hey, my money; I can do with it what I want. You are not being cheated.

DAVE BAST

I love the way it is translated in some versions: Do you begrudge me my generosity? Are you getting down on me because I am lavish with my money; because I give to others what I gave to you even though they didn’t seem to earn it as you did? But, the question really is did you earn it? That is maybe what we need to ask.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Jesus here concludes the whole parable with a line that appears elsewhere in different contexts in the New Testament. It seems to be something Jesus said more than once: The last will be first and the first will be last; and what Jesus is saying is: Those in this world who *think* they are first...maybe because they are super spiritual over achievers for God might just find out they are not first after all; and those who *think* they are going to come in last are going to come in first. God is going to kind of undo...in his grace, God is going to undo our normal categories of thinking. Salvation is going to work on a different economy than financial economies of the world.

DAVE BAST

What does it all mean for us, and how do we apply it to our lives? Let’s think about that in just a moment.
Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and our consideration today in this third part of a seven-part parable series of the laborers in the vineyard from Matthew Chapter 20. Dave, you know, the 16th Century Protestant Reformation was founded on a trio of claims related to salvation. In Latin they were *sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus*: We are saved by faith alone, through grace alone, by Christ alone. The message of the Reformation is that salvation is not about you; it is not about your deeds; it is all grace.

DAVE BAST

Right; and grace is God’s favor lavished upon us; God’s love extended toward us, not because of anything we did, not because of our own deserving, simply because he chooses to love; and we access that simply by saying yes to it. That is what faith is, opening our hands and receiving from God. Even faith, the reformers said, is not a work, it is not something we do...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Even faith is a gift, really, if we get right down to it; and it is all found in Christ. Christ has all the treasures of God. Christ has all that we need; and we receive Christ simply by saying yes to him. That is the Good News of the Gospel; and that is what this parable is really getting at deep down; because deep down, even those of us who talk about grace and celebrate grace have a tendency to think a little bit differently when we look at our own lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is sometimes said that we sing *Amazing Grace* in church, but when it comes right down to it, we think our salvation hinges on a different hymn, *Trust and Obey*...because we think...deep down... We said this in the first part of the program. This is the backdrop of thinking in Jesus' day that it is all a merit-based system and God is issuing rewards and punishments based on what we do, but that was not just Jesus' day, as you said earlier Dave, that is today, too. So, deep down we kind of think: Well, you know, what is the difference between me and my non-believing neighbor? Well, he gets drunk on Saturday nights, whereas I go to bed on time so I can go to church on Sunday. I am doing it right. He is not doing it right; and *that*...not the grace of God...that good behavior of mine...that is what gets me saved and keeps me saved. That is a very natural way of thinking, I think, because our deeds are visible, grace is invisible; but we have to rely that it is all grace alone.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is easy to fall into the way of thinking: I give, I tithe...like the Pharisee in another of Jesus' stories...I even tithe on my kitchen herbs and vegetables, I tithe to the littlest, little amount that I give, and I go to a church and I do all these things. I am a good person and that is why God loves me, and that is why I have this blessing in my life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is not that that is not important, right? This is all gratitude in our lives, right? I mean, that is all gravy. This is our lifelong thanks to God. So, those deeds are important to God. They are evidence that we get it, that we want to say thank you to God every day of our lives. Those things are important. It is just that it is the fruit of our salvation, not the root; and we get those things mixed up pretty readily.

DAVE BAST

You know, one of the great examples in the Bible of this is the Apostle Paul, who was a zealous and righteous person. He was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, he never forgot what he was and he used to remind the people in his churches regularly that he was even a persecutor of the Christians originally because of his zeal, as he thought...misplaced zeal for God; and yet, when he met Jesus all of that changed...all of that fell away. So, there is a great passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians, in the third chapter, where he says: ^{4b}If someone else thinks they have reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. ⁵Circumcised on the eighth day...(Now he is going to marshal all...he was a six a.m. guy as far as Judaism was concerned. He was there right from the start.) Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; in regard to the Law a Pharisee; ⁶for zeal, persecuting the Church; as for righteousness based on the Law, faultless.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁷But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

So, there is Saul of Tarsus before he became the Apostle Paul, there is his great reversal. Once he saw Jesus on the cross and realized: Oh, that is what it requires to get saved; the death of God's own Son; what in the world did I think my little deeds could ever add up to anything?

DAVE BAST

Yet, don't we often think, you know, wait a minute; whoa! So, Jesus is telling me that it is all grace. If I have served him all my life, I have sacrificed for him, I have given up all kinds of pleasures, I have tithed faithfully, so I didn't buy the things that I really wanted, I gave them to God's kingdom and the Church; and I did all this. I am eighty years old. I served them all, and I am going to be saved the same way some bum who never gave a thought to God until his deathbed is saved? It is not fair!

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right...

DAVE BAST

What is the point of being good? Why be good, then?

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, you hear once in a while about some murderer who was executed and he comes to faith five minutes before the lethal injection; and what the Gospel says...what Paul is saying in Philippians 3 is that, yes, he gets in for the same reason you did. Now, that doesn't mean your deeds are worthless. They will endure and redound to God's glory and they were part of your witness. That is all important in terms of responding correctly to salvation, but don't think that that is what gets you saved; and yet again, as we said, Dave, it is so easy to fall into that trap, to sort of let the economics of this world dictate how we think about even spirituality and salvation in how it is we get saved; but this parable clearly says no.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, maybe we should just name it right out. Grace is not fair...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

If fair means giving everybody exactly the same thing, then grace is not fair because grace does not give us what we deserve or what we have earned, grace gives us far more...

SCOTT HOEZEE

What we have earned is death....and hell.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. Whether we are the lifelong, faithful Christian or the last-minute, last hour thief on the cross convert, grace is still a gift, and far more than we deserve.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And maybe one last little twist from the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor, who said: You know, when we Christians read this parable, we always think that we are the 12-hour workers. We just assume that that is who we are. How do you know that you are the 12-hour worker? What if in God's eyes you are the one-hour guy, and in that case, their joy at getting a whole denarius for one hour of work...maybe that should be our joy when the day is done. Instead of feeling like we are the 12-hour people who earned it and were entitled, maybe read this parable from the other way, because who knows; you might be one of those fewer hour workers, and if you get into the kingdom by God's grace alone, well, yippee!

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We should have that kind of joy and rejoicing at the free gift of salvation through Christ.

DAVE BAST

I like that. That is such a great point. At the last day of my life...at the last day of the world I hope that we are able to say: Praise to you, O God, with all joy for your immeasurable grace, your gift.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeper into scripture with us on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee. We hope you will join us again next time as we study God's grace from the perspective of Jesus' parable, the prodigal son in Luke 15. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know other scripture passages or topics you would like us to discuss on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-laborers-in-the-vineyard>

Printed on June 24, 2026