

256. The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Small Group Discussion

- 1. Read horizontally (development in the other Synoptics).** What is Mark's context for this saying of Jesus given in Matt. 20:16? What is Luke's context? What do these differing contexts suggest about the individual sayings of Jesus and their settings in the Gospels?

- 2. Read vertically (development within this particular Gospel).**
 - 1.1 Immediate context.** Sometimes the immediate context helps to interpret a parable. Matthew has prefaced the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard with two episodes: (1) the Rich Young Ruler in 19:16–26 and (2) Jesus' proclamation on The Disciple's Reward in 19:27–30. The meaning of 20:16 Matthew has contextualized by Jesus' prior statement in 19:24 in the Rich Young Ruler episode. This statement in 19:24 would have been quite shocking to Jesus' original audience. Why? What was a common assumption about the rich in Jewish society? What has Jesus done with this assumption? How does 19:24 contribute to the meaning of 20:16?
 - 1.2 Literary structure.** An "inclusio" is a literary technique for defining the boundaries of a text unit. This is done by beginning and ending the unit with repeated words or ideas. Compare Matt. 19:30 with 20:16. This probably is an intentional "inclusio" on Matthew's part that puts boundaries on the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. To what unit does the inclusio of 19:30 and 20:16 bind this parable? What does this suggest about the function of the parable in Matt. 20:1–16?

- 3. Social/cultural backgrounds.**
 - 3.1 Social backgrounds.** What is the social background of hiring laborers in the first-century Jewish society? How does this set the context for understanding the meaning of the different wages paid for different workers?
 - 3.2 Cultural backgrounds.** English translations of 20:15 tend to obscure the literal Greek because the literal Greek reflects a cultural idiom that is hard to translate. The actual Greek is, "or is your eye evil because I am good?" What does the idiom of the "evil eye" mean in first century Mediterranean societies?

- 4. Establish significant points.** What significant "points of reference" can be established in this parable for interpretation and application? What would you say is the "main point" of the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard?

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Matt. 20:1–16

20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. **2** After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. **3** And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; **4** and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. **5** Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. **6** And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' **7** They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' **8** And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' **9** And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. **10** Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. **11** And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, **12** 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.' **13** But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? **14** Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. **15** Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' **16** So the last will be first, and the first last."

Mark 10:31

10:31
"But many that are first will be last, and the last first."

Luke 13:30

13:30
"And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."