

A Proverbial Parable

Bob Bonahoom

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See "Parables", John MacArthur, 2015 pp 1- 74

Open your bibles to Matthew chapter 20, which is ***The Parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard***. [Also on back of handout] I thought it might be profitable to teach a little about parables in general and then dig into this particular parable, which teaches an important lesson about salvation.

A radical view rapidly gaining popularity in these postmodern times is the idea that stories like parables, by their very nature, have no fixed or objective meaning. That their meaning is entirely subject to the hearer's interpretation.

Charles W. Hedrick [Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Missouri State University and Fellow of the Jesus Seminar] in his book titled: "Many Things in Parables: Jesus and His Modern Critics " states: "Parables work any way interpreters and auditors want them to work, in spite of whatever Jesus may have intended with them...we simply do not know how Jesus used parables and clearly have no hope of ever discovering his intention".

So, let's be clear up front that Jesus absolutely had a meaning in mind when he spoke in parables! It would be a monumental mistake to assume there is no theology or doctrine underlying Jesus' parables! But just saying that doesn't answer the question of why he spoke in parables, so we will get to that in a minute.

But first, what is a parable? A biblical parable is simply a long simile or metaphor with a distinctly spiritual lesson. Figures of speech like "strong as a horse" or "quick as a rabbit" are simple similes.

These similes are simple and straightforward and do not require an explanation, but a parable extends the comparison into a longer story or more complex metaphor and the meaning always has a point of spiritual truth, but it is not necessarily obvious.

So what is most distinctive about a parable? It's not the plot, length, form, literary devices, or narrative style. A parable is simply a figure of speech made for comparison sake in order to teach a spiritual lesson.

It's important to also remember that a parable is not an allegory like Pilgrims Progress in which every character and virtually every plot conveys some cryptic vital message.

Parables are not to be mined for layer upon layer of secret significance and minor elements within the story are not to be laden with spiritual meaning. The parable's lessons are simple, focused and without much embellishment. In most cases the parable makes one simple point and teaches one central lesson.

Dr. John MacArthur gives this excellent and simple definition of a parable: "A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson^[DB1]."

That sounds simple enough, but not everyone who heard Jesus' parables was able to understand them. What? I thought MacArthur just said they were simple?

Well they are, but in Matthew 13:11, the disciples asked Jesus why he was speaking in parables and he said: ***"to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted."***

Why did he say that and to whom is he referring when he said; “to them” it has not been granted? Some historical context might help us better understand this.

Near the end of Jesus’ second year of public ministry we encounter what has been called the “busy day in Galilee”. Many things happened that day, one of which was an encounter between Jesus and some hostile Pharisees.

This event was important because the whole character of Jesus’ teaching suddenly changed following the encounter.

After that day in fact, Jesus would stop preaching straightforward sermons full of key prophetic text from the Old Testament and instead, when he taught publicly, he spoke in parables.

The Pharisees had turned the Sabbath into an oppressive inconvenience by way of their rigid system of rules by which they tormented other Jews, but Sabbath observance was never supposed to be burdensome! It was meant to be the exact opposite, a delight and a respite for weary people. By the time we get to Matthew chapter 12, there had been two earlier confrontations provoked by the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath.

One of those was the time, when on the Sabbath, Jesus’ disciples gleaned some grain to eat, which the Pharisees considered to be forbidden work. Jesus replied by showing the folly of a rule that forbade an act of human necessity on a day set aside for the benefit of all humanity.

The second incident occurred when Jesus healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. These two incidents must have embarrassed these religious zealots immensely because we read in verse 14 of chapter 12 that the Pharisees “...**went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy him.**”

Their hatred of Jesus had reached a murderous level, so Matthew probably chose to record these earlier incidents here in chapter 12 to set the stage for what happened next in Matthew 12:22-37 where we read a shocking account of blasphemy by these Pharisees. It was the final straw that provoked Jesus to change his teaching style to parables.

This happened several months after the two Sabbath disputes. Matthew 12:22 tells us of the demon possessed, blind and mute man whom Jesus healed. This of course was a stunning and glorious example of Jesus' power to both heal and cast out demons.

This instant public healing was yet another hugely embarrassing impediment to the Pharisees strategies so in verse 24 the Pharisees declare: “**this man casts out demons only by Beelzebub, the ruler of demons**”. Now this is the precise moment when everything changed. Jesus accuses them of committing the unpardonable sin.

The reference here to the unpardonable sin is specific. Jesus did not say an unpardonable sin. The definite article “the” shows us that Jesus was talking about this singular, flagrant, malicious and deliberate act of evil blasphemy by these particular men at this specific time.

The hard-hearted intentionality of the Pharisees sin is the main factor that made it unpardonable. That demon possessed man's healing was as much a work of the Holy Spirit as it was the work of Christ.

All Jesus' miracles were done according to the will of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, to attribute the Lord's miracles to Satan was to credit Satan with the Holy Spirit's work!

These men certainly knew better, so their abominable insult was a direct, deliberate, diabolical blasphemy against the Spirit of God. They spoke their blasphemy with full awareness that they were opposing God, lying about his anointed servant, and blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

So finally, we see the reason that Jesus would conceal the truth from them by using parables in his public speaking for the rest of his ministry. By deliberately rejecting the truth, the sworn enemies of Christ seemed to have lost the privilege of hearing additional truth from his lips.

Their hardened hearts were unable to discern the meaning of the parables because as we read earlier, understanding would not be granted to them.

The shift in Jesus' teaching style to parables was immediate and dramatic. Everything he taught in public from that day forward would be concealed from everyone except those with willing ears to hear, and he used parables frequently to accomplish this.

Other reasons for the use of parables could have been that the graphic imagery of the parables helped keep truth rooted in people's memory until it sprang forth in faith and understanding. People just remember **stories**^[DB2]!

To sum it up then, Jesus' parables had a clear twofold purpose: They hid the truth from self-righteous or self-satisfied people who fancied themselves too sophisticated to learn from Him, while the same parables revealed truth to eager souls with childlike faith who were hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

If you have your bible, please open it now to Matthew chapter 20. I want to frame this parable with some near-term context. Consider that shortly before Jesus told his disciples this parable, they had witnessed Jesus' encounter with the Rich-Young-Ruler, and they were probably concerned about their own standing in his kingdom yet to come.

They had given up so much, but in their minds perhaps they were asking, was it enough? Did they need to do more?

Keep their concern in mind as we also notice that our parable is encased within a proverb. Look at chapter 20 and verse 1. Notice the parable starts with; ***“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.”*** The first word “for” is obviously referring to what came previously at the end of chapter 19. Remember that the chapter break between chapter 19 and 20 is an artificial interruption.

So, looking back into chapter 19 and reading verses 27 through 30, we read; ***“Then Peter said to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” And Jesus said to them, “truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.”***

Jesus re-affirms that the disciples are destined for glory with him, but he ends his re-assurance with a little proverb by stating; ***“But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.”***

Next comes our parable, but first I want you to first skip all the way to the end of the parable and look at verse 16 of chapter 20 and notice that it ends with the same proverb; ***“So the last shall be first, and the first last.”***

So here we have what is called an inclusio, which is the same phrase at both the beginning and end of a block of text. It's like a set of bookends that tells us that between the bookends we can expect something important. In this case, the likely explanation of the twice stated proverb. It's a good bet that this parable has everything to do with who is first and who is last in the kingdom of heaven.

The Parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 "When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so, they went. 5 "Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6 "And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' 7 "They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' 8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.' 9 "When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 "When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 "When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last shall be first, and the first last."

So here we have the story of a landowner with a large vineyard who was hiring day laborers to work for him.

Grapes were planted in the spring, pruned during the summer and harvested during a very short season near the end of September. The rainy season begins immediately after that, so the harvest was hectic, because the crop had to be brought in before the rains came.

A landowner would probably need extra help during that time and to get that help we see him going to the most public place in the village to hire unskilled, temporary, day laborers.

Wages for day laborers were notoriously low compared to what was paid to standard full-time employees or household servants. The rate for a full-time employee, servant or Roman soldier was 1 denarius per day.

This was a good living wage and much higher than would have been typical for unskilled day laborers of the type the landowner was hiring. Instead, an unskilled day laborer would typically be paid a small fraction of what a denarius was worth.

So, the landowner in our parable was unusually generous to offer these unskilled laborers a full denarius for a single day's work.

The early morning crew (think about 6 am) that he hired first, would have heartily agreed to these terms and been anxious to get to work. Next, we see that at the third hour, or about 9 AM, the landowner went back to the marketplace.

This second time, the landowner negotiated no specific amount before hiring the workers. All he said was "whatever is right, I will give you." They must have known him to be an honorable man because the second group took him at his word, even though the terms were vague.

Next, in verse 5 it reads: **"Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour and did the same thing."** **"And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around;** So, we see the landowner, going back to the marketplace at regular intervals, noon, 3 o'clock and again at the 11th hour, which was 5 o'clock.

That means at his last visit, only an hour was left in the work day, but he still went to find more workers, and more were still there waiting.

These were persistent men who had been waiting all day and were so desperate for work that they had not given up. We should not mistake their idleness for laziness. When the landowner said: **'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?'** **"They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.'**

The owner also hired them on the spot presumably with the same vague terms he had offered the 9 AM group. He said: **"You go into the vineyard too."**

In Luke 10:7. Jesus says, "the laborer is worthy of his wages.". This being a strict principle of mosaic law. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 states: **"You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. "You shall give him**

his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the Lord and it become sin in you."

Our landowner, being an honorable man and faithful to the precepts of God's law did just that. Verse 8: ***"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first."***

It's significant that he instructed the foreman to pay the workers in reverse order. Remember, the men now at the front of the line had only worked one hour while those at the end of the line had worked a full 12 hours. Yet, as the foreman began to distribute pay, those who worked the shortest amount of time each received a denarius."

This is astounding! These men received a full day's wage at a Roman soldier's pay scale, in return for just one hour of unskilled labor!

Keep this in mind, because this seems to be the key point of the parable.

We can imagine that upon seeing this, the men at the end of the pay line got very excited. You can almost see each man excitedly telling the man behind him what was happening. They must have assumed that by the time the foreman got to the end of the line the men there would receive 12 days wages!

At this point in the story, Jesus doesn't tell us what happened with the 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock crews, but the clear implication is that they also received one denarius.

So, what did they do? Verses 11 & 12: ***"When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.'***

This just screams unfairness to our fallen nature! But what had the landowner promised to give them? "A denarius for the day."

Not only was that a fair wage; it was unusually generous for minimum wage workers, and it was what they happily agreed to, but now they show resentment toward the landowner!

So next look at verses 13 through 15: ***"But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?'***

How many of us, if we were at the end of that pay line would probably have felt some welling up of resentment? After all, those men at the end of the line had worked the full 12-hour day, most of it under the hot sun, while the other workers hired at 5 PM likely worked under a cooling breeze at twilight for only an hour.

Suddenly, their gratitude and admiration for the landowner's generosity gave way to bitter resentment. The 11th hour workers were of course ecstatic. They must have certainly understood how graciously they had been treated!

Now let's go back to the proverb. Remember for a minute that our parable begins and ends with the proverb: ***"So the last shall be first, and the first last."***

In Mark 9:35 Jesus says: ***"If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."*** or Mark 10:43-44 where Jesus says: ***"...but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all."***

These two verses are teaching humility and self-sacrifice, which are imperatives, that is, they are commands instructing us to be humble servants, rather than to seek prominence and power.

But our parable starts and ends with an indicative which is a simple statement of fact, not a command. The simple fact is "the last will be first and the first will be last." There is no command here, this is not about doing anything, it is just a statement of the way it is.

Let's make a mind picture by thinking of a foot race. The only way for the last runner to be first and the first runner to be last is if everyone finishes at the exact same time. In another words, it's got to be a dead heat!

That, of course, is precisely Jesus's point. Those men hired first and those hired last, each received the same pay no matter how much work they did. All of them received the full benefit of the landowner's generosity in equal shares.

So that is the point of the parable. And it is really very simple. The parable is a precise picture of God's sovereign saving grace. All sinners are unworthy, but the riches of God's grace are inexhaustible, and all believers receive an infinite and eternal share of his mercy and kindness. Even though none deserve it.

Think for a minute about the stark contrast between Judas Iscariot, and the thief on the cross. One was a close disciple of Jesus who gave three years of his life to the best, most intensive religious instruction available anywhere, ever. But he lost his soul forever.

The other was a hardened, lifelong criminal who was still mocking everything holy while being put to death for his crimes. But he went straight to paradise forever.

The difference in the two men could hardly be more pronounced. That hardened criminal had a remarkable last-minute change of heart. Literally, in the dying moments of his wretched earthly life, he repented of his sin uttering a simple prayer of faith: ***"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."***

And he was ushered that very day into Paradise clothed the perfect righteousness of Christ and all his guilt was borne away and paid for by our Lord.

Those who think heaven is a reward for doing good things would certainly protest by saying this was throwing justice out the window. They are of course are wrong, as justice was fully served by our Lord who propitiated that thief's sin along with the sin of every believer that has or will ever live.

We must keep in mind that all people are totally unworthy, but God on the other hand, has every right to show mercy and compassion to whomever he chooses. God's grace is not unjust. Christ made full atonement for the sins of those who trust him, and thereby he turned justice in their favor.

1 John 1:9 states: ***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*** That dying thief who repented in his final moments and entered paradise is enjoying eternal life and everlasting fellowship with Christ!

Remember that the denarius was not something the workers had earned. It is not like a minimum-wage in a fair-exchange for labor, because it is far too much for that. Rather, it represents an extremely gracious gift that exceeds the best reward any day worker could ever merit.

So again, here's the point of the parable: If you are a genuine believer, you receive the full benefit of God's immeasurable grace, just like everyone else in God's kingdom.

Your admission into heaven is not determined by the length of time you spent doing the Lords work. The blessing of redemption is not doled out based on your achievements.

Forgiveness is not measured by weighing your good deeds against your sins nor is it partially withheld if eventual believers sin for too long or too badly.

Everyone who enters the kingdom receives the full abundance of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. They each entire denarius!

That's true no matter how long you've worked in God's kingdom. It's true no matter how hard or easy your circumstances are. It's true whether your service was minimal or maximal. Its true whether you die a martyr in the prime of life or live a peaceful life and die of old age. It's true of those who come to Christ as adolescents and true of those who repent of their sin on their death bed.

When this earthly life is over. If you are a believer, you will go to be with Christ, just like that thief on the cross.

It might be worth thinking about why Jesus gave this particular parable at the time he did.

He spoke it to his disciples shortly after his public conversation with the Rich Young Ruler. Recall that the Rich Young Ruler thought he had done everything right. Jesus challenged him with 6 of the commandments and the young ruler said he had kept them all.

He thought that by his keeping the law he was good to go. After all, he had also been blessed with much as he had wealth and power and he was very likely religious.

But Jesus exposed the fact that the young ruler loved his possessions more than he loved either God or his neighbor. But the man would not acknowledge this sin and was unwilling to repent, so he went away sorrowful and unsaved.

Of course, the disciples were stunned by this because it seemed like Jesus was putting obstacles in front of the man rather than encouraging him.

They were baffled and they asked, who then can be saved? If not this very religious and seemingly sincere young ruler, then who? The disciples were likely thinking about the impossibility of meriting God's favor.

They were probably examining their own hearts, but unlike the young ruler, they had in fact left all to follow Christ, but they were looking for some reassurance from Jesus that their sacrifice wasn't for naught and it seems that was part of what prompted this parable.

Now think of the apostles as the 6 AM group in the parable. They were the first ones Jesus called at the start of his ministry and they had been working through the heat of the day for a lot longer than 12 hours!

It had been nearly 3 years since they had given up homes, jobs, and relationships to serve Christ. With the exception of Judas, they certainly all loved Jesus and each of them would go on to dedicate their lives for the sake of the gospel.

So, let's end with a summary of the core gospel truth that we might take from this [parable](#)_[DB3].

First, eternal life is a gift that God gives purely by grace. According to his sovereign will. God gives the same abundant grace to everyone who trusts and follows Christ. Repentant tax collectors, harlots, beggars, and criminals will all share in the same eternal life as those who served all their lives.

There are, of course, rewards in heaven for good works and faithfulness, but rewards are not the issue in this parable. Jesus is here teaching a lesson only about eternal life, which belongs to all who embrace Him as Lord and Savior. Heaven is not a reward to be earned by hard labor; it is a gracious gift, given in full abundance to all believers equally. God shows no partiality.

In the parable the landowner went out to find the laborers in the marketplace of the world and brought them into his vineyard. God does the seeking and the saving.

Our salvation is his work, and that's the main reason we have no right to make demands or set limits on what he gives someone else. It's God's prerogative and his alone to show mercy to whomever he chooses.

God's sovereign call is also ongoing. Notice that we saw the landowner go back to the market place several times together to gather needy workers. God calls sinners, not the self-righteous. He brings into his vineyard all those who recognize their need and repent.

Why does he wait until the last hour to call some? Why didn't the landowner hire everyone in the marketplace on his first trip there? God sovereignly determines both when and who He will call, and their willingness to come is the result.

God regenerates the heart and man is then able to answer His call when he hears the gospel. God's call is irresistible and effectual...it never fails

God always gives more than we deserve. All that we receive is infinitely more than we deserve, so there is never any reason for a Christian to resent God's grace toward others.

Remember, there are many who have been more faithful, worked harder, labored longer, and suffered greater trials than us. But grace abounds even to the chiefs of sinners in that God saves all of us who repent, believe and follow Jesus.

Brothers and sisters be thankful that it matters not whether you came to trust and follow Jesus in your childhood or in old age. Whether you were first to come or last to come makes no difference.

The call on your life came at the exact moment that God providentially intended and for that reason He gets all the glory!

Amen!