

Sermon Wesley Box Hill 20 Sep 2026

THE PARABLE OF THE LABOURERS – Matthew 20: 1-16

Greetings once again in the precious name of our Lord Saviour Jesus Christ.

Over the years I have heard some rather interesting reactions to this parable: Common reactions having included much disappointment. I heard one friend complain: “Why would Jesus tell a story about people getting paid for work on a farm, and make it sound okay that some people start work at 9am, and others at 5pm, and they all get the same pay for a day’s work? That just isn’t right.” Dolly Parton sang about working ‘9 to 5,’ which many of us can relate to, but some of these workers are only working from ‘4 to 5.’

If you are like me, you will have some parables of Jesus that you really enjoy: I really like the parable about the shepherd who has lost a sheep, and he goes looking for that sheep, and there is so much joy when he finds it. I like the parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, who both go up to the Temple to pray, and the Pharisee prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like this tax collector,” and the Tax Collector prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

It is a bit more difficult to enjoy a parable that includes an unfair pay scale. It’s probably fair to say that we find equal pay for grossly unequal work hours a touch offensive, and probably not best practice in any industry (except sport).

So, is it true that Jesus thinks it’s okay for workers to be ripped off?

Is this what Jesus really thought? And of course, the answer is going to be ‘No,’ Jesus did not believe it was okay for workers to be ripped off, and we will learn that this parable really has nothing to do with workers’ rights.

It actually gives us good insight into what daily labour hire systems were used in First Century Palestine. Psalm 104:22-23 describes working hours as being from the dawning of the sun to the rising of the stars. And, according to Lev 19:13, a labourer was to be paid on the evening of the day he worked. I say ‘he,’ because these casual labourers were generally men.

So, if the starting time was roughly 6am, then the times the other workers in this parable commenced work were: 9am, Noon, 3pm and 5pm.

So, was any worker ripped off?

Firstly, Jesus is not dealing with economic issues here: imagine if we actually paid workers like this. But it is most important for us to understand, that in this Parable, **nobody was underpaid**. The going rate was a coin for a day’s work, and everybody walked away with a coin. However, if we put ourselves into the shoes of the workers who started at dawn, at day-break, they watched people only work 1 hour and get their coin, so their expectations were rapidly rising. How does the human mind work? Person X has received 1 coin one hour’s work, I did 12 hours’ work: on that scale, I might expect 12 coins. Well, that seems a bit much, so I hope I get 5 coins. But it wasn’t to be.

Jesus told the parable, so that all the people listening would learn that God is good, and that he blesses his children with so much more than they deserve. The reality is, everybody got a day's pay, so no one lost out. Father God blesses us all abundantly ... far more than we expect, and far more than we deserve. So ultimately, this parable is not about pay rates for workers, but it is all about the unexpected Goodness of God.

Secondly, a natural thing for us humans to do is to compare ourselves to other people, and when we do, we often end up smelling like roses don't we, as we over-inflate our worth, and under-state the worth of other people.

Sometimes, we watch what others are earning, and we start comparing what we do, and what we earn, to other people. But here's the catch ... we always compare upwards. We look at the pay rates of those who are earning more than us, and we think we should be earning more. **I ask you, are you rich?** And you look up the scale, and say, I'm not as rich as Bill Gates or Gina Rinehart. We don't compare ourselves to the homeless man in Melbourne, or the struggling family on the fringe of society, or even to the billion people on our planet who live in abject poverty.

In the parable, the Landowner asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?" The word envy here really means giving an 'evil eye.' You are looking hard at others, you are glaring at others, you are frowning at others, without giving thanks for how the landowner has blessed you with a day's pay... without giving thanks for how God has blessed you in life. This is a Kingdom of God parable, that highlights the love, grace and **especially the generosity** of God.

The final observation I want to make is that there is gospel story that we are particularly reminded of today. The repentant thief on the cross turns to Jesus in his final hours, and is promised a participation in paradise.

Do you see the point here? The disciples followed Jesus carefully and attentively for 3 years, and were looking forward to sharing in paradise with Jesus. I gave my heart to Jesus nearly 50 years ago, and serve him as a Lay Preacher. That bloke on the cross turned to Jesus in his final hours, and we might assume gave nothing to God in his previous years.

Do you see what is happening? The risk here is that I will think that my 50 years of commitment to Jesus is more important than the 2 to 3 hours that the repentant thief on the cross gave Jesus.

If we compare a repentant sinner on his deathbed to your ten or twenty or forty or fifty years of committed service to Jesus, we end up minimising the fact that this man has actually turned his life towards Jesus. It is not our role here to compare years of service, but it does become our role to rejoice when any **person turns to Jesus**. After all ... salvation belongs to our God.

God calls us to be his labourers. The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few; the harvest is ready, and God wants us to be his loyal servants.

So, am I being faithful to God's call on my life? Or, am I too busy looking at other people, and building up jealousy, rather than love?

So, let us keep our eyes firmly fixed on God, let us avoid a heart filled with jealousy, and let us learn to appreciate the goodness of God. Amen.