**WHO’S IN CHARGE OF WHAT?**

**(Matthew 20:1-16)**

I’m going to begin today’s message by reading a dramatic monologue I’ve written that is based on today’s Scripture passage—Matthew 20:1-16:

Things have been kind of tough lately. I haven’t had regular work in a while. I’m a bricklayer by trade, and things have been slow, really slow. But early every morning, I go down by the market in the center of town and wait with the others guys who are looking for work. Often, a business owner or a foreman will come by and hire some of us day-laborers for some job or project they’ve got going. I always bring my tools just in case it’s a construction job. Those are the ones I like because they always pay the best.

Yesterday, Ben Jacob came looking for some hands. He’s the landowner who has the large vineyard just outside of town. I hear that his grapes make some of the best wine around. I haven’t had any of his wine. It’s a bit expensive for a guy like me.

At first, I was surprised to see him because I know he has a regular crew. Then I remembered that it’s late September. His vines have got to be ripe by now. They are probably sagging low under the weight of those large, luscious grapes of his. And I know the rains are coming. He’s got to get his harvest in before the rains hit. If he doesn’t, it’s gonna be a mess, and he’s gonna lose a lot of money.

When Ben stopped his truck, I hesitated a bit. I thought to myself, “If somebody needs a construction worker today, I could make a lot more.” Then, I realized that’s a big risk. There’s no guarantee that anybody else will show up. That’s what happened the day before. I was there all day, and nobody showed up. I hated to go home and tell my wife that I didn’t get any work.

So, I joined the others guys. We approached Ben. One of the men asked, “What do you got?”

Ben answered, “I can you give ya’all a full day—12-hours. I’ve got to get my grapes in today because the rains are comin’ and they’re comin’ quick. I’ll pay you $10 an hour. How does that sound?” I knew I could make more money laying brick, but there was no guarantee of that. This was a sure thing, and it was honest work. I nodded my head and climbed into the back of his truck with the other guys. It was short drive to Ben’s vineyard.

He let us off where his foreman was waiting. The foreman handed us all knives and showed us how to harvest the clusters without hurting the vines. It took a little bit, but I got it down pretty good.

The first hour or two went quickly with the sun still being low on the horizon, but by mid-morning, it got hot. That sun rose into a cloudless sky. I was sweatin’ pretty good. The foreman was a good man, though. He would come by, check on us, and give us water breaks.

I was so busy that I didn’t even notice that another group of day-laborers arrived around 9:00. But I sure noticed the group that came in at Noon. By then, my arms and back were really aching. I recognized some of those men. To be honest, they aren’t the best workers, but this wasn’t exactly rocket science. With someone over them, keeping them on task, they could bring in a lot of grapes, and that’s why we were there.

I was surprised when another group came in at 3:00 in the afternoon. And I was floored when yet another group showed up at 5:00. There was just an hour of sunlight left, and from the way those men looked, Ben Jacob had really scraped the bottom of the barrel.

During water breaks, I talked with some of the men from the different groups. I asked, “Hey, what did old Ben promise to pay you?” I was shocked when they replied, “He didn’t say. He just said he would take care of us.” I didn’t say what I thought, but I thought to myself, “You guys are really naïve. At the end of the day, you just might discover that you worked for next to nothing.”

They might have known what I was thinking because in their own defense, more than one of them said, “Ben Jacob is known as a fair, even generous man. He’ll do right by us.”

Again, I didn’t say what I was thinking, but I was saying to myself, “People may say Ben Jacob is fair, but I bet he cuts corners wherever and whenever he can. I’m glad I’ve got a deal with him. I’m glad I know what he’s gonna pay me.”

It seems like that last group had barely got there when the foreman reported that the job was all done. There was not another grape to be picked, and all of them had been transported to the barn where they would stay dry. We harvested that entire vineyard in one day. It’s a good thing, too. I could hear some thunder off in the distance.

We lined up to get paid. Ben Jacob was the one who brought out the pay envelopes. His whispered something to the foreman, and then the foreman did something odd. He said he was going to pay everybody in reverse order of when they arrived. He started with the guys who had just worked one hour. I thought to myself, “Well, $10 is $10 **if** they even get that.”

All of a sudden, I heard whooping and hollering coming from those last guys to show up who had just been paid. I saw one of them open up his envelope and show off the contents. I counted six $20 bills. That’s $120 for just one hour. There was only one honest man among that bunch of ne’er do wells. He went up to the foreman, and I overheard him say, “Sir, I think there’s been a mistake. I think I got overpaid.” I wouldn’t have done that. I would’ve just kept quiet.

The foreman said, “There’s no mistake. Mr. Jacob promised he would take care of you. Go on over there and wait for the truck. We’ll take you back to town soon.”

I thought to myself, “If those guys made $120 bucks for one hour, I’m gonna make a killing, today.” Boy! Was I in for a surprise! Each man in each group came to get their pay, and everyone was given an envelope containing $120. That’s what the guys who worked for three hours got, and the guys who worked for six hours, and the guys who worked for nine hours, and even us guys who worked for twelve hours. We all got $120.

By the time I got my pay envelope, I was angry. I was ready to spit on it. Why is it that I got the same amount as the guys who didn’t work long enough to get any dirt under the fingernails, the same as guys who didn’t even work hard enough to get a bead of sweat on their forehead, while I had borne the heat of the day and had worked till I was bone-tired? And they call Mr. Jacob fair. There was nothing fair about that.

Mr. Jacob had been watching, and after the last man was paid, he thanked us for working hard and for getting the entire harvest into his barns. I couldn’t hold my tongue; I complained, “These Johnny-come-lately’s got the same amount that we did, we who have been here all day long and have worked our tails off for you.” I glared at him.

You know what he said to me? With a smile he replied, “Friend, I have not wronged you. I paid you exactly what you agreed to. Didn’t I?” Then, with a more serious expression, he added, “Take your envelope and get on the truck back to town. If I want to be generous, can’t I be generous? Are you really upset that I’m generous with my own money?”

I didn’t have a reply. I just got on the truck back to town. I told my wife all about it when I got home. She didn’t seem to share my anger. She was just glad we had money to buy some groceries.

I’ve told you a story based on today’s passage—Matthew 20:1-16. Let’s read what Jesus actually said . . .

This story can be taken, interpreted, and applied in many different ways. From it I want to make and unpack two statements. Both statements answer the question, “Who Is in Charge of What?”

1. **GOD IS IN CHARGE OF HIS VINEYARD.**

In the story Jesus told, the landowner represents God. That means God owns every vine and every grape on those vines. They all belong to God. In both the Old and New Testaments, the idea of a vineyard is used as a metaphor for the people of God. The idea of bringing in a harvest is a metaphor for leading people into a saving relationship with God. That means both the harvest and the harvesters belong to God.

According to the parable, there are two chief ways that God demonstrates that the vineyard belongs to Him.

1. *God Graciously Chooses Who Will Do the Work.*

Now, God is God. Nothing is too difficult for Him. I’ve always thought that God could find a more effective way of bringing people to Himself. He could send them a certified letter from heaven. He could use His finger to write in the sky a gospel message. He could interrupt every broadcast with His own commercial at the end of which He could say in His own voice, “I’m God, and I’ve approved this message.”

There’s got to be a better way to make Himself known that to use imperfect, fallible people like you and me. While that may be true, the fact remains that God chooses to use people to accomplish His work. God always uses human instruments.

When God wanted to free His people in Egypt, He sent Moses. When He wanted to deliver His people, He sent judges. When He wanted to communicate to His people, He sent prophets. At a particularly perilous time, when He wanted to protect His people, He sent Esther. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, when God wanted the world to know that good news, He sent the apostles and preachers and missionaries and you and me. God uses people whom He chooses to do the work He wants done.

In the story before us, the landowner represents God. The landowner needs to get his harvest out of the field and into the barn. What does he do? Does he put an add in the local paper and solicit resumes? Does he ask people to come in person and bring a list of references? Does he go to the local college and say he wants to hire the best agronomy students because he only wants professionals working in his fields?

No. He goes to the center of town where the day-laborers hang out. He hires them on the spot. He probably doesn’t even know their names, much less their work history. There is no prospective employment interview. There is no job application for them to fill out, and they don’t even have to pass a drug test first.

Unlike the landowner, God knows our names. He knows our work history. He knows our weaknesses. He has seen our ineptitude on full display, and yet, He calls us anyway. He employs us in His Kingdom’s work without an interview, without checking our references, and despite the fact that we are not the best and the brightest.

In the story, it is clear that the landowner is in charge. He chooses who gets to work for him. He chooses what they will do. He even chooses when they work.

Some have known from an early age that God had chosen them to be part of His family and they have known the great privilege of serving Him practically their entire lives. Others have come to Christ at the 11th hour of their lives.

Do you really think the landowner needed to go to town and get people to work for just one hour? I don’t think he did it for his benefit; I think he employed them for their benefit.

In the mid to late 1980’s, Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopalian priest, wrote a trilogy of books on the parables of Jesus. His first was *The Parables of the Kingdom,* and his third was *The Parables of Judgment,* but the second was *The Parables of Grace.* In that second volume, Capon identifies five groups of people that Jesus came to save: the **last,** the **least,** the **lost,** the **little,** and the **dead.** It is those groups of people that Jesus saves because they are the only ones who sense their need of His grace. Most others bask in the glow of their supposed goodness.

Noting that Jesus called His followers to be salt in our culture, Capon wrote:

. . . the sad fact is the church, both now and at far too many times in its history, has found it easier to act as if it were selling the sugar of moral and spiritual achievement rather than the salt of Jesus’ passion and death. It will preach salvation for the successfully well-behaved, redemption for the triumphantly correct in doctrine, and pie in the sky for all the winners who think they can walk into the final judgment and flash their passing report cards at Jesus. But every last bit of that is now and ever shall be pure baloney because: (a) nobody will ever have that kind of sugar to sweeten the last deal with, and (b) Jesus is going to present us all to the Father in the power of *His* resurrection and not in the power of our own totally inadequate records, either good or bad.

But does the church preach that salty message? Not as I hear it, it doesn’t. It preaches the nutra-sweet religion of test-passing, which is the only thing the world is ready to buy . . . In spite of all our fakery, though, Jesus’ program remains firm. He saves losers and only losers. He raises the dead and only the dead. And He rejoices more over the last, the least, and the little than over all the winners in the world. That alone is what this losing race of ours needs to hear . . . (*The Parables of Grace,* p. 35).

This past week I spoke with a lady who talked at length about how her parents taught her to do the right thing, and all of her life she has tried to the right thing. Then, she talked about how she and her husband taught their children to do the right thing, and how they have tried to do the right thing. Then, she boasted about how she and her children taught her grandchildren to do the right thing, and how those grandchildren are trying to do the right thing.

Listen up, there is not a single person in Enid, OK or this state or this country or this world who is going to go to heaven because they tried to do the right thing. The only people who go to heaven are those who confess they have done the wrong thing and they trust Jesus to save them from all the wrong things they have done.

That brings us to the second thing our text tells us about how God is in charge of His vineyard.

1. *God Graciously Rewards All of His Workers.*

It doesn’t matter if we have served God all of our lives or if we trust Him in the last moments of our lives. All who receive Him are rewarded with eternal life.

I don’t believe that some get a mansion and some get a shack in heaven. The Bible doesn’t say that anywhere. Jesus said He is going to prepare us a room in His Father’s house. All of us get to live in the Father’s house.

I do believe there are degrees of rewards in heaven based on our faithful service, and exactly what that looks like, I don’t know, but every Christian is rewarded with eternal life.

Be sure that you understand this, heaven is not payment for services rendered. The reward of heaven is a gift freely given by God to undeserving sinners. We do not and cannot earn a place in heaven. It comes from the gracious hand and the gracious heart of God.

In the Dennis the Menace cartoon strip, Dennis and his pal Joey were leaving the Wilson’s house with their hands full of cookies. Joey wondered aloud, “I wonder what we did to deserve this?”

Dennis wisely replied, “Look, Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we’re nice, but because she’s nice.”

Heaven has nothing to do with our goodness. It has everything to do with God’s graciousness and mercy.

As we have looked at the question, “Who’s in Charge of What?”, we have focused mainly on God. While **God is in charge of His vineyard,** there is one more thing to add.

1. **WE ARE IN CHARGE OF OUR ATTITUDE.**

The first group of workers went to work having made an agreement with the landowner. They knew what would be coming to them at the end of the day. They agreed to it.

The subsequent groups, however, didn’t really know what their wage would be. The landowner simply said, “Whatever is right I will give you.” They were fine with that.

Honestly, I don’t think I would take a job on the basis of the owner saying, “I will pay you whatever is right.” His idea of what is right and my idea of what is right might be completely different. I might have a loftier conception of my worth than the employer might have.

Those groups that went into the fields at 9 AM, Noon, 3 PM, and 5 PM have **an attitude of trust.** They trusted the promise of the landowner. They trusted Him to keep His word and do the right thing.

Do we trust God to do the right thing? Do we trust Him to keep His promise? If you wind up with cancer or another dread disease, you might think God has let you down. If you lost a loved one who was still relatively young, you might think God has failed you.

O friend, let God be God. Trust His wisdom. Trust His love. Trust His plan. Trust His Spirit to carry you and see you through your dark valley. God doesn’t break promises. He never has, and He is not going to start now with you.

In addition to an attitude of trust, we are in control of our **attitude of thanks.** All of the groups except the first group that had been there all day were thankful for having received more than what was expected. That first group felt they had been slighted somehow.

A sense of entitlement is not anything new. The younger generation in our country is not the first generation in world history to feel a sense of entitlement.

We encounter a culture of entitlement just about everywhere. Universities have tenured professors who feel entitled. In the military, rightly or wrongly, officers feel entitled to things that are denied to enlisted soldiers. Some businesses have hourly workers that don’t have the same perks as salaried employees. In churches, both the big givers and the longtime members feel entitled to a greater say in how things run and what decisions are made.

Instead of cultivating a sense of entitlement, we need to promote a sense of thankfulness within ourselves.

Morehouse College is a historically black, men’s, private college in Atlanta, GA. At last year’s graduation ceremony in May of 2019, the commencement speaker was the billionaire Robert Smith. In his speech he promised, “My family is going to create a grant to eliminate your student loans.” He claimed that he and his family would pay off the entire student loan debt of the 2019 [Morehouse College](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morehouse_College) graduating class of 396 students.

I looked it up, even with scholarships, the average tuition for a Morehouse student is $33,000 a year. Potentially, you could graduate and owe $100,000 or more in student loans.

If you are a 2019 graduate of Morehouse, and you have a mountain of student debt, you are ecstatic; you are thankful. How do you feel if you are a 2018 graduate, and you have a mountain of student debt? If you are a parent who worked two and three jobs to put your child through school so he wouldn’t have to graduate with student debt, how do you feel? Do you feel cheated somehow? Do you feel robbed?

Could not Robert Smith say what Jesus said in v. 15?

I’m going to close with a famous quote from Charles Swindoll in which he addresses our attitude.

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company, a church a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me, and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you. We are in charge of our Attitudes.

God is in charge of His vineyard and His grace. You are in charge of your attitude. Will you trust Him? Will you thank Him for His goodness and grace that He has shown?