

Workers in the Vineyard

This parable (Mt 20:1-16) is about several workers who are hired by a land owner, over different periods of time. In the evening, the workers who are hired first expect to be paid more than those hired later. But the owner pays all of the workers equally.

Land Owner: Most of the productive land was held by large-scale elite owners. From the First Temple period through the Second, a pronounced shift in the patterns of land tenure took place, shifting from smallholders producing the Mediterranean triad of grain, grapes and olives for subsistence to large estates orientated to large-scale production and export crops. The owner in this parable is one of the wealthy sub-elites who owned large estates and converted the land to viticulture dedicated to the production of export crops.

Laborers: The social order consisted of a patron-and-client society of unequal relationships with the estate owners assuming the role of patrons and those who have lost the land becoming their clients. In such a relationship the client's wellbeing is determined by the closeness of rapport he maintains with the patron. The landless laborers in the parable did not belong to the ambit of such a relationship. They were outside of any assured protection and regular work opportunity and, hence, more vulnerable to be deprived of their basic wages even on rare occasions when they found a work to do.

Early workers: The working hours of the Israelites were 12 and was counted from 6:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M.¹ So the landowner went out before 6:00 A.M. to get the laborers. They were hired for an agreed wage of a denarius (Mt 20:2).

Late comers: The second, third and fourth groups of laborers were hired for an appropriate wage (Mt. 20:3-5). Then the fifth group of laborers were hired with no wage agreement for one hour of work (Mt. 20:6-7).

Principles for interpreting parables:

When interpreting parables, it is essential to ask what the parable meant to the original listeners to Jesus, as well as to original readers of Gospels. Hence, we must identify the audience, immediate context, cultural background, Old Testament background, main characters, its message to various audiences and the surprising twist.

The principal *audience* are the people. Jesus' disciples and pharisees must have been present. *Immediate context* are the incidents of the rich young man (Mt 19:16-26) and Peter's question (Mt 19:17-29). In the *Old Testament*, Israel is always compared to a vineyard nurtured by God² and the Israelites as the chosen ones and the first to inherit the kingdom.³ The land owner, early workers, late workers and foreman are the *main characters*.

¹ The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning. (Lev 19:13); On each day you shall pay the servant's wages before the sun goes down, since the servant is poor and is counting on them (Deu 24:15).

² "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant" (Is 5:7); "Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard, they have trodden my portion under foot" (Jer 12:10).

³ "The LORD, your God, has chosen you from all the peoples on the face of the earth to be a people specially his own" (Deu 14:2); "You will live in the land I gave to your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God" (Eze 36:28).

The *message* of this parable to the disciples is Matthew's anticipation of the request of James' and John's mother (Mt 20:20-21) and Jesus' response (Mt 20:26-28). The parable is intended 'to exclude arrogance, ideas of superiority over others in the kingdom.' To the pharisees the message is that the kingdom will be taken away if they do not repent (Mt 21:43) and many others will come to inherit the kingdom (Lk 13:29). That salvation is a free gift of God; God's mercy goes beyond justice; and the gentiles have the right to the kingdom is the message to people.

Surprising Twist: Hiring and paying the workers by the land owner in person, multiple hirings through the day, same wage to all workers and the reverse order of payment are the surprising twist in this story.

First, land owner absenteeism was the norm in viticulture. Owners were seldom involved in the day-to-day management of the vineyard, still less of the hiring and payment of temporary help. When Jesus began the story, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard" the audience would have been shocked.

Secondly vineyards required large temporary labor inputs during the agricultural cycle for the clearing of brushwood, weeding, burning weeds, hoeing and pruning. The most demanding period for extra workers was the vintage period when pickers and treaders were needed in large numbers. Nevertheless, a land owner or foreman should know at the time of hiring as to how many workers would be needed. Multiple hiring at different times is another surprise of this story.

The same wage for all workers is another twist. The early workers hired at dawn agreed for a denarius, which was a Roman's soldier's pay for a day. Those who were hired at 9 am, noon and 3 pm were promised a 'just wage.' For the workers hired at 5 pm no specific wage was mentioned. In the evening, however, the land owner ordered the foreman to pay the workers 'beginning with the last and ending with the first.' Each received one denarius, a full day's wage.

Conclusion:

Notice that no group complains about the order of payment nor about the amount they received. All the groups had the identical sense of justice and equity and believed that they should be paid proportionately to "the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But except for the first group everyone else was content and kept silence.

Whatever the laborers' sense of justice and expectation, it is exceeded by the landowner's goodness and generosity. If the landowner's treatment represents God and his treatment of humanity, then certainly these details fit and comply with the parabolic likening the situation to the Kingdom of God.

Some scholars believe that the first group hired represents Judeo-Christians in Antioch who are resentful of the presence of Hellenistic Christians in "their" Church. An earlier layer found in oral tradition of the Jesus Followers might be that the first group hired represents Jewish Jesus Followers who resent the presence of Greek-Speaking Jews or Samaritans among the Jesus Followers. The earliest layer might be that Jesus saw the first group as Pharisees and Sadducees who resented that tax-farmers and sinners were the very people that Jesus sought table fellowship with.

In the Kingdom of the heavens God is desirous of saving all. The kingdom of heaven represents a reversal of the world's values.

The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat (Mt 13: 24-30; 36-43)

The Parable:

A householder's slaves were eager to pull up the weeds in his field. They were warned that in doing so they would root out the wheat as well and were told to let both grow together until the harvest.

Explanation by Jesus:

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels (Mt 13:37-39).

Weeds:

Matthew uses the Greek term ζιζάνια (*zizania*), which refers to the genus of wild rice grasses. What Matthew most likely refers to, however, is darnel or cockle, a noxious weed that closely resembles wheat and is plentiful in Israel. The difference between darnel and real wheat is evident only when the plants mature and the ears appear. The ears of the real wheat are heavy and will droop, while the ears of the darnel stand up straight.

Enemy:

While everyone was *asleep* his enemy came and sowed *weeds*. Roman law prohibited sowing darnel among the wheat of an enemy. In the Greek text it is, ἐχθρὸς ἄνθρωπος (*an enemy man*). The meaning is not that the enemy was a man; for he was the devil (Mt 13:39). It is an Hebraism such as in the Book of Esther⁴ and signifies a certain enemy, and one indeed that is an implacable enemy to man.

Principles for Interpretation:

The *audience* are miscellaneous crowds and disciples. The *immediate context* is that this parable is situated between the parable of the Sower and the Mustard seed. In the *Old Testament background*, harvest is a metaphor for final judgment (Jer. 51:33; Hos. 6:11; Joel 3:13) *Main characters* are the sower, enemy, wheat, weeds, slaves and harvest.

The parable's *message to different audiences* such as the crowd and the disciples can be summed up in this way: Since the parable is interpreted only for the disciples, it seems that the primary application was for them. Jesus may have told the parable to help curb their hostile feelings in view of opposition to Jesus by the religious establishment.

The parable applies to the first community level (the audience of Jesus) and the second community level (the early church). Those in the first community needed to understand that they were part of the new believing community and to understand the reason for the present opposition. Those in the second community needed to realize that absolute purification of the world in this age may not happen.

The *surprising twist* is the verse, "Let them grow together until harvest." Instead of pulling out weeds as they appeared, the householder said, "No, if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them."

Conclusion:

⁴ Esther said, An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman! Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen (Est 7:6)

Geographically this parable was spoken to the crowds by the sea and the interpretation was delivered to the disciples in a house (Mt 13:36). Main theme of this parable is contrast. Note the contrasts in the narrative between the man and the enemy, the sowing and the counter-sowing, the good seeds and the bad seeds, the coming and going of the enemy, the coming and going of the servants, the plan of the servants and that of the master, and the gathering in barns and the bundling for fire.

The contrast is allowed to continue in this story. God permits the righteous and the wicked to coexist in this age but He will eventually separate the wicked, judge them, and destroy them, while gathering the righteous together to be rewarded by enjoying His presence together.

Separating the good and the bad is to be left to the householder and his servants and is to be delayed until the harvest. The householder seems to be unable to take steps to remedy the situation. This inability does not stem from ignorance. On the contrary, the farmer, fully in control of the situation waits it out. He knows what to do.

In interpreting this parable Jesus made no mention of the sleeping, the questioning servants, the growth of both the wheat and the weeds, the gathering of the wheat into the barn, and the bundling of the weeds for fire. Parables are open-ended stories. It is up to the listener to draw meaning out of the story.

There are two groups of people in the world – children of the kingdom and children of the evil one, wheat and weeds – and that their destinies are fixed. Jesus says that at the end of the age, the angels will “collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and will throw them into the furnace of fire” (Mt 13:41).

Perhaps there were some overzealous “weeders” (perhaps the slaves in the parable) in Matthew's congregation who wanted to purify the community by rooting out the bad seed. Jesus' parable makes clear that any attempt to root out the weeds will only do more damage to the crop. God's judgment about these matters will take many by surprise. We can leave the weeding to the angels, and get on with the mission Jesus has given us -- proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God drawing near.

What is Parable?

Figures of Speech:

An expression that uses words to mean something different from their ordinary meaning:

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. For example, “You are my sunshine;” and “He has the wild stag’s foot.”

A metaphor makes a comparison between two unlike things or ideas. (i.e.) Heart of stone; Time is money; The world is a stage; ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’ (Ps 23:1); and ‘I am the light of the world’ (Jn 8:12).

A **simile** is a comparison between two unlike things using the words “like” or “as.” (i.e.) As blind as a bat; Eats like a pig; As wise as an owl; ‘Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves’ (Mt 10:16); and ‘You are like whitewashed tombs’ (Mt 23:27).

An **analogy** is the inference that if two things agree with each other in some respects, they will probably agree in others. For example, “shells were to ancient cultures as dollar bills are to modern culture.”

An **allegory** is sustained longer and more fully in its details than a metaphor, and appeals to imagination, while an analogy appeals to reason or logic. (i.e.) Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:3-9) and the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32).

The word “**parable**” is a transliteration from the Greek word “parabolē”. The Greek noun παραβολή (parabolē) is used a total of 50 times in the New Testament (13 times in Mark, 17 in Matthew, 18 in Luke, twice in Hebrews, but never in John). Etymologically, it stems from the preposition para – παρα (“alongside of”) and the verb ballein – βαλλειν (“to cast, place, throw”) meaning ‘throwing something along with something else.’

Greek **parabolē** is used usually to translate the Hebrew word **mashal**. **Mashal & parabolē** refer to “figures of speech,” which can be of many different types (proverbs, maxims, riddles, symbols, fables, parables, allegories).

A related Greek word, **paroimiā** (paroimiā), which also refers to some type of “figure of speech” or “proverb,” is used only seven times in the LXX (Pro 1:1; 26:7; Sir 6:35; 8:8; 18:29; 39:3; 47:17) and five times in the NT (Jn 10:6; 16:25a, 25b, 29; and 2 Pet 2:22).

Scholarly Definition:

Parable is a *metaphor* or *simile* drawn from *nature or common life*, arresting the hearer by its *vividness or strangeness*, and leaving the mind in sufficient *doubt* about its precise application to tease it into *active thought*.

- The meaning of most parables is *not* so *obvious*, or at least it shouldn't be. If we assume, we know what Jesus is talking about, we are probably missing the main point.
- Most parables contain some element that is *strange or unusual*. They should cause you to say, "Wait a minute! That's not how farmers do their work! That's not what kings usually do! That's not what normally happens in nature!" And this strange element should cause you to think!
- Parables do not *define* things precisely, but rather use *comparisons* to describe some aspect of how God acts or interacts with human beings. Yet to say “A is like B” does not mean that “A is identical to B in all respects”; so, one should be careful not to misinterpret or misapply the parables.

- Most parables are *open-ended*. Rather than reaching a conclusion, they challenge us to keep on thinking! Rather than having us “stop thinking”, they invite us to “stop and think”!

Poor Man’s Lamb (2 Sam 12:1-7):

Prophet Nathan does not directly confront King David about his crime but resorts to the parable of the poor man’s lamb. Nathan presents a legal case which is in actuality a veiled reproof of David. The prophet knows full well that as a seasoned judge David will issue his own verdict.

The rich man is David, whose kingly riches Nathan details in 12:7-8. The second of the two men in the city is Uriah, who, by contrast is relatively poor. Uriah has a pet lamb to whom he greatly is attached. – presumably a reference to his wife Bathsheba. Ruthlessly, the rich man steals the poor man’s lamb and slaughters it – a reference to David’s abuse of Bathsheba while fully cognizant that she is Uriah’s rightful wife.

In this parable, reference to the king is *not obvious*. The *strange or unusual* element in this story is the rich man taking the poor man’s only lamb even though he had flocks and herds in great numbers. *Comparisons* between the rich man and king David and the poor man’s lamb and Bathsheba are veiled. This parable is *open-ended* as the story ends without any question or comment. *Surprising twist* of this story is the accusation of the king by the prophet, “You are the man.”

Jesus was the master of teaching in parables. His parables often have an unexpected twist or surprise ending that catches our attention and drives home the parable's lesson. The parables give us a feeling and insight into heavenly and spiritual concepts that cannot be expressed in mere words. They also give us a much richer understanding of the kingdom of God and its values, which are often the opposite of worldly values. Without understanding the parables, it is impossible to fully understand Jesus and His teachings.