

# BaptistWay: Membership in the Kingdom

January 20, 2016

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Feb. 7 focuses on Matthew 20:1-16.*

This parable in Matthew's Gospel is especially troubling. As is usual with Matthew's parables, Jesus begins with an ordinary scene—a landowner hiring workers to labor in his vineyard (20:1). Agreeing to the expected terms (a day's wage for a day's work), the workers head to the vineyard (20:2). Here, however, is where our story takes a turn. On multiple occasions (9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m. and 5 p.m.), the landowner sees other people who are available to work but have no work to do. So, he hires them, as well, and promises to pay them "whatever is right" (20:4).

## Unanswered questions

Before proceeding further, we should pause and reflect on all the questions not answered by this parable. Why did the landowner go back to the marketplace? Did he really need more workers, or did he simply want to put people to work? Are those hired—at any time of day—hard workers? What sort of pay did the late-hired workers expect—especially those who worked for only one hour? All of these questions and many others simply are left unanswered by Jesus and Matthew. Therefore, we should look closely to see what is at stake in this story as it draws to its conclusion.

When the end of the day comes, the foreman is told to pay each set of workers in reverse order from their hire (20:8). Thus, those hired last will be compensated first, and they receive a full day's wage. Those hired first anticipate a greater payment, perhaps 12 days' wages, since they worked 12 times as much as those hired last, but they are disappointed to receive

the same daily wage as everyone else. Their response is to cry that the landowner is unfair, and they want justice (20:12). The landowner responds by saying he has fulfilled their contractual terms: “Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?” He says if he gave more to others, then that is his business (20:15). He even asks “Or are you envious because I am generous?” The Greek sharpens this question a bit more as it reads, “Or is your eye evil because I am good?”

### **Three aspects to consider**

There are three aspects to understanding this parable. The first centers on the landowner’s statement to those hired later that they would be paid “whatever is right.” This focuses our attention on justice, which for Matthew always is linked to righteousness. The landowner’s actions challenge our sense of justice and fairness. Despite the objections of those hired first, he has been faithful to what was promised. Yet, rather than seeing justice as the opposite of grace and mercy, the parable paradoxically places them together, so justice becomes part of caring for others. The workers hired later had needs, but no work. The landowner stepped in to help. We are unsettled by the idea that differences in workload do not produce different levels of compensation, but we are told both before the parable and afterward “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (20:16).

Second, we should notice the larger picture of this parable in Matthew’s gospel, a text that clearly has been concerned about Israel. That the land in focus is a vineyard should remind us of places in the Old Testament where Israel is described as a vineyard, such as Isaiah 5. Even though this image occasionally was used to speak of Israel’s disobedience, the effect is still the same: Israel is God’s vineyard. Moreover, when those hired first to work in the vineyard grumble about their pay (20:11), we should recognize what part of Israel’s story they are imitating—the Israelites’ grumbling against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness (Numbers 14:2). But what are

these workers grumbling about? That those hired last (the Gentiles) have received the same compensation as those who were there from the beginning (Israel). The inclusion of the Gentiles into the promises of Israel is indeed a scandalous thing and a key issue in Matthew's Gospel. Many of us are in fact Gentiles as well, those who have welcomed God's grace at a late hour. We should remember we benefit from such generosity, too.

Finally, we should consider the link the parable offers between spiritual truths and economic practices. That is, Jesus asks us to think about the operation of the kingdom of God, or God's reign in heaven and on earth, through the lens of a landowner hiring workers for his vineyard. In business terms, those hired first claim their advantage over those hired last has been damaged by the landowner's generosity. "You have made them equal to us," they say. We should be able to recognize this complaint and its motivation. Living in a world characterized by similar ambitious business activities and risk-taking, contemporary economic practices encourage us to win at all costs, even at the expense of another. Even the price of necessary goods is set on the basis of scarcity, so someone's gain is another loss. When we observe these connections in Jesus' parable, we should be cautioned against separating the economic realities of parable from its spiritual meaning. In fact, we might even see a critique of such practices through the sheer abundance of God's grace.

### **Embrace the fullness of God's kingdom**

Each of these aspects of the parable, when taken together, invite us to embrace the fullness of God's kingdom, including the transformation of ourselves, the shape of success and our view of others. The workers in the vineyard are not permitted to exert claims of superiority over those who arrived late. Instead, they are supposed to hear and pay attention to the landowner who calls them "friend." That is, not only are they made equal with the other workers by his actions, but the transformative grace of this parable should also make them friends.