

**Russell Kelfer**

# **The Workers in the Vineyard**

**#1360-A**

**Series: The Parables of Scripture**



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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

# The Workers in the Vineyard

It was a hot, sweaty day. The Israeli sun was seemingly merciless in its pursuit, sapping the energy and strength from those who toiled beneath its torturous rays. But the job had to be done, and so the foreman would hire men as laborers to work for a twelve-hour period for a predetermined wage.

The salary was fair by the standards of the day, and the men were paid each day at the end of the day. The problem was, the foreman hated to see men idle. And so as he went into the nearby town for supplies and such, he would see still other men who had not found work for the day, and he would offer to let them come and join the harvesters, for indeed the time was short and the need crucial. The problem came at sunset, which, in effect, was payday every day. But, then, let's let Jesus tell the story. It was, as we shall see, another of His incredible parables; it was the essence of truth set in a story format, designed only for those "who had ears to hear". We find this particular parable in Matthew, chapters 19 and 20:

Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come *and* follow me.

But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.

And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?

But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

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And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. (Matthew 19:21-30)

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.

And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way.

Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise.

And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?

They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.

So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.

And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny.

But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny.

And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house,

Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.

But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no

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wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?

Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.

Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen. (Matthew 20:1-15)

### THE PREFACE TO THE PARABLE

The chapter break comes really in the middle of the passage, and the word “for” at the beginning of chapter 20 simply reaches around and takes all that has been said before and wraps it into a package. The package contains truth after truth about this kingdom Jesus was explaining in word pictures to His somewhat slow-learning band of disciples. There are principles shared in this passage by the Master that had best be looked at carefully, for they touch on the heart of God’s sovereignty and grace, and they teach some basic concepts of Christian behavior both on and off the job. Those of us with “ears to hear” had best listen.

Jesus had just finished telling the disciples who would be able to enter into the kingdom easily. Someone had forced their way through the throng and set before Him a group of little children for him to bless and to pray over. The disciples, who didn’t quite get the picture of what this kingdom would be all about, were irritated that someone would be so insensitive as to interrupt Messiah’s ministry with a group of toddlers.

But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.

And he laid *his* hands on them, and departed thence.

(Matthew 19:14,15)

He had told them, by illustration, what kinds of qualities would allow God to enter into a person’s life—the qualities of childlikeness: vulnerability, transparency, humility, and faith. The things that make a child a child would easily allow a man or woman to find the kingdom of God. Conversely, the qualities of self-sufficiency, pride, hypocrisy and self-reliance would be huge stumblingblocks that kept men and women from finding the face of the meek One, and thus finding eternal life.

THE CATASTROPHIC CHOICE

The disciples seemed to realize they were hearing something new, but they still didn't grasp it. So they brought a young man to the Master who wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him if he had kept the commandments. The young man said he had done so all his life. Jesus then turned and made one of the most incredible statements of His ministry. Listen to what He said:

Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come *and* follow me.

(Matthew 19:21)

The Scripture says that the man went away sorrowfully, because he was a man of great means. He had accumulated a lot of things. It is at that point that Jesus gave His mind-boggling illustration about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. I can all but hear the silence that must have followed. I can all but hear the disciples thinking, "If He keeps talking like that, we'll lose our base of financial support." Jesus, however, wasn't worried about appeasing men, but about teaching truth. He wasn't scolding men and women for being successful, or for making money.

Don't misread the passage and put on a cloak of pride over your poverty. He was talking about the things that serve as barriers to the kingdom, and the things that serve as bridges; and the self-sufficiency that accompanies success is more often than not, a subtle signal to the flesh that apart from Him, *ye can do all right*.

Jesus pulled no punches where this matter of the kingdom was concerned. It was not to be a picnic, and God wasn't looking for a few good men who could, in and of themselves, build His kingdom. He was looking for men and women who thought like children when it came to their own abilities and God's sufficiency. Like a toddler reaching out to his father, knowing that unless that father caught him, he would fall, God was looking for a level of dependency that would be mirrored in a child's trust. We sometimes teach about the parable of the workers in the vineyard without seeing it in the light of the backdrop Jesus was unveiling.

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He began by asking a rich man to go home, sell everything he owned, give it away, and follow Him. That phrase “sell that thou hast” implies selling everything you have, and is reminiscent of our last study of the parable of the pearl of great price. There is a reason for that: same teacher, same subject, same kingdom. Now, however, Jesus is applying the issue of discipleship not to an exchange, where you give up everything to get something more valuable, *but where you simply give up everything for the sake of someone else, for a totally intangible reward.* You do what God did; you give yourself away.

Now, listen carefully to what Jesus was saying. He was saying that there are two kinds of treasures, earthly and heavenly. Earthly treasures can be seen, touched, admired, and spent. Heavenly treasures are invisible, bring no temporal satisfaction, no earthly admiration, offer no power that comes from the world’s currency. They are opposites in every way.

Jesus was teaching something vital here as He set the stage for this parable. He was saying that oftentimes *to accumulate spiritual treasure, you have to be willing to abandon the treasures of this world that so occupy your heart and so deprive you of dependence on God.* He was addressing a man who was considered moral and spiritual in every way. This man was implying that by keeping the law, he ought to be entitled to kingdom citizenship.

But Jesus knew his heart. He knew that this man’s treasures were wrapped up in material packages. Of course, He was right. The Scripture says, *“The man went away sorrowful because he had many possessions.”* Notice: Jesus didn’t run after him, apologize for being so direct and say, “That’s okay, it was just a test. God doesn’t expect you to do that.” Instead, He turned and addressed the crowd that heard this conversation and remained behind for the explanation. He looked that startled crowd in the eye and said, “This is a good example of why it is so difficult for someone whose mind is fixed on things to make the spiritual switch and seek the kingdom. In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

### THE POSSIBILITY OF IMPOSSIBILITY

The disciples misread the Master again. They assumed that if kingdom entrance was *this hard*, it wasn’t likely to be a very

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big kingdom. They didn't understand the two-kingdom principle, and they didn't understand the concept of two kinds of treasures. Because of that, they responded by throwing their hands in the air in total despair. This was their reply:

When his disciples heard *it*, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? (Matthew 19:25)

You might translate their response like this:

What's the use then?

They were "exceedingly amazed." They were in shock. Never in their wildest dreams did they expect this amazing carpenter to tell them that the entrance requirements for this kingdom of His would be virtually impossible. "Who then can be saved?" they asked. What He was saying was virtually the antithesis of all they had ever believed. He was saying that the very people who wielded the most power, had the most credentials, carried the most weight, would be all but locked out of the King's palace except for some kind of divine intervention. What's the use, indeed, they thought. Who can be saved?

The passage goes on, "Jesus beheld them." It means to "gaze at with intensity." He looked them straight in the eye the way you would somebody you were going to tell the deepest secret of your life, and He said those amazing words:

With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible. (Matthew 19:26b)

Please understand what Jesus just said. He did not say it is difficult; He said it is impossible. That word is a word that denotes the absolute absence of any potential. It is used in:

That by two immutable things, in which *it was* impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: (Hebrews 6:18)

But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Impossible. What a word. With men this is impossible. What a statement. What is impossible? It is impossible for men to be saved *by anything they do*. It is impossible for men to be saved *by anything they have*. Nothing but God's grace can save man, and no one but God can release that grace. The other side of the

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coin, however, was that with God, *nothing would be impossible*. The vilest of sinners, the most hardened criminal, that arrogant self-righteous religious hypocrite, *all could be saved*.

### THE FORSAKEN FRUSTRATION

It would be up to Peter, naturally, to respond to the Master at this point. Bashful, he wasn't. Sensitive, he wasn't. Brash, he was. He couldn't hold it in any longer. He and his cohorts had basically left everything to follow this unknown Galilean. They envisioned themselves to be the cabinet members in the first kingdom administration. They visualized themselves surrounded by dignitaries, royalty, the elitist of the elite. Now Jesus was telling them that the very people they thought would man the posts of government alongside them probably wouldn't even be candidates for admission, let alone selected for leadership. What a downer. Peter just had to let Jesus know that he didn't approve. His disgust was couched as a question, but the tone of the question makes it more of a complaint than an inquiry.

Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?  
(Matthew 19:27b)

Peter was feeling sorry for himself, like someone who had sold everything they owned to back a candidate for public office, only to imagine they had spent the money and then withdrawn from the race. "We've forsaken all." That was their complaint. "What do we get in return?" That was their question.

Some of you may secretly want to ask the same question. Go ahead. Jesus is used to it. He has heard it millions of times. "Lord, I've given up my old habits, my old friendships, my old vocation. I thought that if I gave up *all that*, you would take better care of me than this. I thought you would see that I got that promotion, that raise, that coveted position. I thought you would heal me of this pain, solve that impending crisis, remove that thorn. Lord, look what I've given up for you. What's in it for me?"

Oh, we would never use those words, but we often have that attitude. We see Christianity and the Kingdom of Heaven as a deal we make with God. We give Him our reputation, our good name, our allegiance, in exchange for temporal success. What fools we are. Beloved, we bring nothing to the table. He brings everything. He gives us *His reputation, His good Name, His great*

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*love*. We deserve nothing. He gives us everything. That's what grace is all about.

Jesus had a simple platform. "He that does not forsake all that he has, cannot be My disciple." Peter is asking what God was going to do for him because he forsook everything. All that did was meet the basic entrance requirements. God had much more in store for Peter, and much more in store for us. For us to appropriate and appreciate that "much more" required "kingdom understanding". So Jesus went on and painted for us a picture, etched in His blood on the canvas of His word.

A foretaste of that glory follows in verses 28-29. Listen carefully as Jesus explains once more that the rewards will be beyond our expectations, but they won't be given here.

And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last *shall be* first.

For the kingdom of heaven is like...

(Matthew 19:28-20:1a)

The Master was going to use this event to teach a parable about the kingdom. First, however, He had to answer Peter's question or accusation. His answer was more than they could have ever dreamed of, though we don't know how much they grasped at this time. Jesus was promising them heavenly appointments given them by the Father in eternity past, that of sitting upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes. But that wasn't the answer to Peter's question. Jesus went on to promise them that whatever they had given up to follow Him, and He stops to give examples, they are promised *heavenly rewards more than a hundred times as valuable as what they had given up*. Then He adds that unusual comment:

But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

(Mark 10:31)

Jesus was making sure that they understood that *on this*

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*earth, based on what man can see*, we don't really know who deserves what recognition. We tend to reward people based on what they do; God rewards them for *who they are*. Man rewards what he sees; God rewards what only He sees. And many who would be the most honored, were we in charge of the trophies, won't be the ones with the greatest recognition. He was trying to make us understand two things:

- 1- God is omniscient. He sees the heart
- 2- Rewards in the spirit realm will be given in heaven, not on earth.

What we see and judge here, then, may not be fair, and if we are not careful, we will think God to be unfair and misunderstand His sovereignty.

### THE MINIMUM MAXIMUM WAGE

With that background, verse one of chapter twenty begins: "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." We have already learned that those words normally precede a story, a deep biblical truth woven into a fictional mini-novel designed for those "with ears to hear". The disciples needed desperately to understand that God's ways are higher than man's ways. They also needed to understand that God is perfect love; therefore, whatever He does is perfect. So Jesus told them a story.

The story is familiar to you by now. It is about the owner of a vineyard who needed day workers to come in and work in his fields. He found a crew and hired them. About 9 a.m., three hours after the men began their labors, he came across some others who were wandering through the city streets with nothing to do. He offered to hire them, too, without any specific salary negotiations, but simply promising to do what was right. About noon, the scenario repeated itself, as it did about five o'clock that afternoon. By now, the fields were filled with workers, some of whom had labored twelve hours, some nine, some six, some only one.

Now, you and I would have taken the wage we promised the men who arrived that morning at sunup and plugged the others into our IBM computers (Israeli Business Machines) and if windows '99 happened to work, we would type in the number of hours they actually toiled and come up with a percentage salary for each of them. That's all they deserved, by comparison.

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This owner or foreman, however, understood something that would later be called grace. So he called the last workers to be hired to come through the pay line first, and gave them the very same salary he had promised those who had worked all day. The ones who worked three hours received the same, and on up the ladder. By now, the ones who arrived at 6 a.m. were ecstatic. They envisioned more than they contracted for, because the others were being so rewarded.

Not so. They got the same amount. Jesus said they murmured, and *based on man's reasoning*, argued that they deserved more because even though they agreed to work twelve hours for a penny, they were now comparing their salaries, *not with what they contracted for, but with what others were receiving*.

The master of the vineyard asked a simple question. "Didn't we agree on a salary?" The men replied, "yes". "Then take what I give you and be satisfied," he responded. And then came the clincher. The goodman of the house said this:

Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?

(Matthew 20:15a)

Beloved, if we were ever to grasp the meaning of that statement, so many of our frustrations would dissolve. We try to make decisions about what we deserve or don't deserve in this life based on a false premise. We think this life is ours, our future is ours, and God is so benefiting from our presence on this planet that He ought to listen very carefully as we show Him what treatment is fair and what isn't.

The truth is we are not our own; we never were. Eve wasn't. Adam wasn't. We are God's creation, created to be images that reflect through obedience the desires of our Creator. We are slaves of God; we are not the masters. And as slaves, we don't have a clue what would best bring in the Master's kingdom.

More than that, we who were never our own, but thought we were, have been repurchased by our original owner at the greatest cost in history, and now we are surely not our own; *we have been bought with a price*. God saw us, wretched, lost, sinful creatures that we were, paid the total cost to redeem us again at our request, *and now we are slaves by choice*. *We are the bondslaves of Jesus Christ*.

How dare we tell the Living God what is and isn't just. How

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dare we arrive at the treasury of heaven in prayer and instruct the goodman of the house how we believe his pay scale should work. How dare we murmur over our lot in life as though, by comparing our lot with someone else's, we have the right to justify anger or bitterness.

We deserve nothing. That's the key. Life itself is a gift; every blessing we have ever received has been of grace. Remember, grace is not God giving us more than we deserve. Grace is God giving us anything at all. What we deserve is an eternity in hell. What we have received is an eternity in the presence of a loving God, filled with worship, adoration, and the dispensing of a treasury of rewards, *none of which anyone has earned.*

Are you angry with God because you didn't get that job? Are you struggling with God because your mate left you, and He didn't somehow intervene? Are you bitter with God over some sickness or some tragedy or some lingering pain? How dare you. How dare we strut around this earth judging the merits of God's mercy and grace based on personal fortunes, *when it's all a gift in the first place.*

If someone were to give you a gift of the most beautiful jewel you had ever seen, and there was no reason at all for the gift, how would you react? Let's assume that the person who gave it to you should be an avowed enemy. You killed his son. You spit in his face. He has no reason to give you anything. And yet, here he is, offering you the most beautiful gift you have ever seen. You are in awe; you are filled with gratitude and humility.

...Until, that is, you look around, and there stands someone you hardly know, *and that person is also receiving a gift from the same person, only his gift is bigger and prettier than yours.* So you throw yours back in the face of the astonished benefactor and run off to the corner to pout. Sure, the gift is still a miracle. Yes, the gift is beautiful. Or course, you don't deserve it. You killed his son. But look at what *you might have been given.* "Woe is me," you murmur, "life isn't fair".

No, beloved, it isn't. If it were, you would still be lost in your sins. You would have no mercy, no grace, and no hope of eternal life. All you would be entitled to is the misery heaped on you by the weight of your sins. Life isn't fair. If it was, you'd be dead in your trespasses and sins.

Praise God, life isn't fair; it's a gift from a God of grace, *and*

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*whatever lot in life befalls you or befalls me is infinitely more wonderful than we deserve.* Not only that, as we properly respond to whatever it is that might seem unfair, God is laying up treasures in heaven for us that He has promised are a hundred times more valuable than anything we have given up or suffered.

Go home today and get down on your knees and acknowledge before God that *you don't want your rightful wages in the vineyard of life.* The wages sin earns is death. Acknowledge before God that you deserve absolutely nothing but an eternal oven, and God, who is rich in mercy, has redeemed you and prepared for you a mansion from which to enjoy the treasures He has stored up for you in the vineyard of eternity.

No, we *won't* get what we deserve.

Praise God.

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WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD

Oh dear God we cry can't You see  
I simply can't stand what your doing to me.  
Of course I can live with a life shy of bliss,  
But Lord I deserve much better than this

Look at my friends healthy and wise,  
Seeming to live under constant blue skies.  
I can't understand Lord, please tell me why,  
Most unbelievers live better than I.

Softly the master whispers in love,  
Child all you have is a gift from above.  
Oh what presumption, oh what nerve,  
Please do not ask me for what you deserve.

I know what you've earned,  
And you've earned it quite well,  
You've earned an eternity —  
An eternity in hell.

How my heart breaks  
As your heart brags,  
your most righteous deeds  
Are as filthy rags.

Oh my child listen  
Look on my face,  
All that you have  
Is a gift of my grace.

One day you'll enter my presence divine,  
And then you'll possess all that is mine.  
Satan has arguments held in reserve.  
But child I won't give you what you deserve.

What I have given is my very life,  
A life filled with joy intermingled with strife.  
A life filled with victory and purpose filled hours,  
A life interspersed with both sunshine and showers

Cry out for what you deserve  
Go on go ahead,  
But I love you so much  
You'll get grace instead.

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### A Challenge to Further Study

1- Take that word “treasure” and trace it through Scripture and see what God has to say about it. Meditate on Matthew 6:19,20. Make a list of your treasures on earth. Make a list of the treasures in heaven as you perceive them.

2- Why was the rich young man in Matthew 19:21-22 so sad? What was his problem? Did he assume he deserved to keep them? Who did Jesus want him to give the treasure to? Why don't we grasp that need in our generation as we ought?

3- Trace the word “impossible” in Scripture. What things does the Bible say are “impossible”? Make a list.

4- Rewrite the parable of the vineyard in your own words, using today's society as a backdrop. Make a list of all the truths you see that surface.

### A Challenge to Further Application

1- What have you “forsaken” to follow Christ? Are you feeling sorry for yourself? What promise does God make in this passage that ought to cause you to rejoice?

2- Based on the way you respond to life's trials and difficulties, *how would you have responded, had you been one of those who was hired at 6 a.m.?* Do you ever murmur about your circumstances, as though God or life isn't fair?

3- Do you struggle with your employer over whether or not what he does is fair? Do others work less and receive the same or more than you? How can this parable help you reconcile your heart to your employer's right to do as he chooses?

4- Be sure to tell God today that *you don't want what you have coming*. You want His precious grace. Thank Him for it.

### A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize the first part of Matthew 20:15 and worship. It says:

Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?

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