

Matthew 20:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

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. This opening verse introduces one of Jesus' most provocative parables about grace, reward, and kingdom priorities. The phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like" (*homoia gar estin hē basileia tōn ouranōn*) signals a parable revealing how God's rule operates—often contrary to human expectations and economic justice.

The "householder" (*oikodespotēs, οἰκοδεσπότης*) represents God as the master who owns the vineyard (Israel, and by extension, God's kingdom work). Going out "early in the morning" suggests the urgency and initiative of divine calling—God actively seeks laborers for His harvest. The vineyard imagery is deeply rooted in Old Testament typology (Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:8-16; Jeremiah 2:21), consistently representing Israel and God's covenant people.

The hiring of "labourers" (*ergatas, ἐργάτας*) establishes the parable's framework: work in God's kingdom is both privileged opportunity and covenant responsibility. However, the parable will subvert conventional wage-labor economics by revealing that kingdom rewards operate on grace, not merit. The householder's repeated journeys throughout the day (third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours) demonstrate God's persistent initiative in calling people into His service at different life stages—early converts and late-life believers alike.

Historical Context

Jesus spoke this parable in the context of His final journey to Jerusalem, immediately following Peter's question about disciples' reward for leaving everything (Matthew 19:27-30). The parable illustrates Jesus' statement that "many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first," directly addressing concerns about hierarchical status in God's kingdom.

In first-century Palestine, day laborers gathered in the marketplace hoping for employment. These workers lived hand-to-mouth, depending on daily wages for survival. Landowners would hire workers during harvest season, with payment typically occurring at day's end according to Mosaic law (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15). A denarius represented a typical day's wage—enough to feed a family but leaving no surplus.

The parable's context addresses Jewish-Gentile tensions in the early church. Jewish believers who had borne "the burden and heat of the day" through centuries of covenant faithfulness questioned why Gentile latecomers received equal standing. Jesus' parable radically asserts that kingdom inclusion depends on God's gracious call, not accumulated merit. This challenged both Jewish presumption about covenant priority and Gentile insecurity about legitimacy. The parable remains relevant wherever religious performance competes with grace-based acceptance.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How does the landowner's initiative in repeatedly seeking workers throughout the day reveal God's heart for the lost?

2. In what ways do we resemble the early workers who expect preferential treatment based on length of service?
3. How should this parable shape our attitude toward new believers or those converted late in life?
4. What does this parable teach about the relationship between grace and reward in the kingdom of heaven?
5. How does viewing kingdom work as privilege rather than burden change our motivation for service?

Interlinear Text

Ὅμοία	γάρ	ἐστίν	ἡ	βασιλεία	τῶν	οὐρανῶν	ἀνθρώπῳ
like	For	is	G3588	the kingdom	G3588	of heaven	unto a man
G3664	G1063	G2076		G932		G3772	G444
οἰκοδεσπότη	ὅστις	ἐξῆλθεν		ἅμα	πρωῖ		
that is an householder	which	went out		early in the morning	G4404		
G3617	G3748	G1831		G260			
μισθώσασθαι	ἐργάτας	εἰς	τὸν	ἀμπελῶνα	αὐτοῦ		
to hire	labourers	into	G3588	vineyard	G846		
G3409	G2040	G1519		G290			

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 13:24 (Kingdom): Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field:

Matthew 13:47 (Kingdom): Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind:

Hebrews 13:21 (Kingdom): Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Corinthians 15:58 (Parallel theme): Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

Matthew 25:1 (Kingdom): Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.

Matthew 22:2 (Kingdom): The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son,

Matthew 13:31 (Kingdom): Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field:

Matthew 13:33 (Kingdom): Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.

John 15:1 (Parallel theme): I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

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