

Title: LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD, MATTHEW 20:1-16  
(Chatham, NJ; 09/25/11, AM) [D – Topics within the Narrative]

Theme: Jesus addresses themes of fairness and God's generosity in the context of who shall be first and last.

Purpose: To address these issues and demonstrate how they affect our lives.

Introduction:

1. Jesus uses the story of the Laborers in the Vineyard to define who are the first and who are the last (19:30 and 20:16).
2. At the end of chapter nineteen he told the disciples that they will be rewarded for their efforts, but the story of the Laborers provides a cautionary tale for those disciples whose expectations exceed the promised inheritance.
3. This is not a tale about the hypocrite versus the true disciple since the entire discussion revolves around what the servant of God can expect to receive.
4. The master is God; the workers are the followers of God; the denarius is eternal life.
5. The issues of fairness and God's generosity surface in this explanation of the first and last.

## I. What is fair?

### A. Fairness and the first hired

1. The conflict over who gets paid what: this conflict hinges on what the first workers consider to be fair
2. They assume those hired last shouldn't receive what the first received
3. However, no one is cheated, no one goes away empty-handed
4. The first received exactly what was promised by their contract
5. The property owner assumes the right to do with his property as he sees fit, and he has wronged no one
6. He gives out only what he owed them according to the bargain

### B. Paying their "fair share"

1. In today's discussions we hear a lot about the rich paying their "fair share"
2. Would someone please define for me exactly how much is the fair share?
3. Is it a percentage of how much they earn? Is it a percentage of the total tax burden?
4. See "Are the Rich Undertaxed?"
5. What is claimed to be driven by social justice may be more driven by an ideology of envy (we want what someone else has) and anger (we fume about it)
6. Be very careful about the world's understanding of fairness

## II. God's generosity

### A. Illustrated in numerous ways

1. Jonah recognized that God's love might extend to those whom he thought unworthy of it, Jonah 4:1-4
2. In some ways (sunshine and rain) God treats the good person and the evil person the same, Mt. 5:45
3. More to the point we are called to imitate God who is "kind to the ungrateful and the evil," Luke 6:35
4. By contrast the pagan gods were largely indifferent to human beings

### B. Beyond the sunshine and the rain

1. His kindness is seen in one of the most common and underappreciated ways
2. Perhaps we don't appreciate it enough until we lose one: the family dog

3. Think about the unconditional love that a dog gives; they respond to humans and can be abused but this works to support my point
4. They are remarkable creatures: note the dog on Nova who could pick out hundreds of toys by name and found one he did not know ahead of time
5. They aren't how they are because they evolved from wolves; God made all domestic animals as a blessing to mankind
6. Dogs are being trained to help soldiers adjust back to civilian life (article)
7. Note the true story of Rin Tin Tin
8. This blessing is available to all, not just those who deserve it

### III. The first and the last

- This is the point that Jesus wants to emphasize
- 19:30 – stated differently in 20:16; here, first will be last and last will be first
- The point there emphasizes the disciple's reward; verse 30 cautions the disciple
- The parable explains the meaning
- 20:16 – Jesus simply reverses the order: last will be first and first will be last; the early church may have understood this as a reference to the inclusion of the Gentiles who ultimately received the same reward
- Essentially everyone, whether they come to Christ early or late, receives eternal life
- The disciples must be cautious about what they think they deserve (cf. Luke 17:10)
- God's generosity drives the story: his grace, not fairness, provides the reward
- Luke 13:30 makes the same statement about those Jews who will be eliminated from entering the Kingdom of God over against many from elsewhere who will be included
- The point is the same: we are not saved because we somehow deserve it

### Conclusion:

1. We must remember that we are saved by grace, not works, Eph. 2:8-9.
2. Salvation does not depend on length of service, type of service, or amount of endurance.
3. Eternal life is given to all who are willing to participate in the Kingdom of God.
4. All equally give thanks for God's generosity.
5. The church offers that generous gift and urge you to receive it today.