

Parable and interpretation? (Matthew 20:1-16)

## **It's a pithy proverb, but it doesn't capture Jesus' story.**

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"The last will be first, and the first will be last." Parables can be confusing, so it's helpful of Jesus to explain them. Or rather, it *would* be helpful if this pithy little proverb actually captured the story it bookends. Instead the parable presents multiple themes, and they undermine each other. The story keeps changing.

The workers come to the vineyard at different times, and they get paid in the reverse order of when they came. Just like that, first and last reversed!

Except, this great reversal can't really be signified by the order they cut the checks in, can it? It's a little underwhelming. Besides, if this is indeed the story's point, its characters seem to have missed the memo.

I like to imagine Jesus narrating parables while volunteers from the audience act them out on the spot. Jesus suggests that this is a story about the first and last switching places, and at first the guy playing the landowner is totally on board.

"Call the laborers and give them their pay," he says. He winks at Jesus. *"Beginning with the last, and then going to the first."*

This is the early-bird workers' cue to get mad that the johnny-come-lately folks are being paid first. And they do get mad—but not about that, exactly. They think they should be paid *more*, not *first*. So the story abruptly stops being about reversing the

first and the last and starts being about equality, and how people don't always like it.

The workers have a point: wages reward work. Once it gets around that this guy pays a day's wages for an hour's work, how's anyone going to find a proper day laborer anymore?

But the landowner has a different idea. And it's the equal wages he pays, not the order in which he pays them, that are the real scandal here. They present a serious threat to the order of things. The last are first, but the first are still pretty much first, too—it's an all-way tie. No one's material well-being is threatened; the threat is to the ranking system itself.

Of course, the workers do have to show up at some point in order to get paid. So it seems like the landowner should defend his wage structure by appealing to a sense of membership, of being inside. You all showed up! No one in this vineyard is last.

But that's not what the landowner says. Again an actor ignores his cue; again the story's theme changes. He doesn't tell the workers that his wage structure is right and good for the following reasons he's happy to detail.

He tells them that it's none of their business. "I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you," he says. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

Looking back, this theme of the landowner's initiative is clear from the beginning. He's not a passive employer, reviewing applications that come in, hiring people who bother to follow up, and then letting them hustle for overtime and promotions. No: five times he goes out to find people, inviting them to come work for a fair day's wage.

And that's what the story ends up being about. Not a reversal of first and last, and not equality among those who come inside. It's about the landowner's choice to give each worker enough to meet their needs.

To sustain this choice, of course, he has to have enough to give. If the landowner's resources were limited, the order of payment might start to matter after all. What if he writes your check last and it bounces? In a context of scarcity, it's important to be first.

If the landowner's resources were limited, equality in the vineyard might look pretty good for those working there today. But what about tomorrow, and the next day? What about those still waiting for someone to hire them? In a context of scarcity, there's only enough for some.

This, however, appears to be a context of abundance. Which brings a question to mind: What if the landowner went out a sixth time, after all the work was done? What if he took a bottomless sackful of cash and just walked around town handing it out?

The story's ending wouldn't change, would it? When the workers complain—not just about those who were only there for an hour but about these hypothetical others who never even set foot in the vineyard—wouldn't the landlord still reply that he can do what he chooses with what belongs to him?