

September 24, Ordinary 25A (Matthew 20:1-16)

Jesus doesn't seem interested in our warped ways of keeping the ledger of life.

by [Ray Speller](#) in the [September 2023](#) issue

The gig economy is often spiritually perilous, and the world needs a hard reset. The societal imperative to hustle until you hoard more than your neighbors has had a profoundly damaging impact on too many people. The prevalent idea that every waking moment should be spent creating, producing, working, and earning has created havoc in the souls and bodies of too many to count, and it only seems to be getting worse with cascading consumer costs, depressed incomes, and ever-increasing shiny new ways to gig and subcontract ourselves into oblivion.

Whether it's finding the newest way to leverage currency trends, maximize social media monetization, flip property, rideshare, start a micro company, sell luxe real estate, deliver vittles, or even sell blood plasma and other corporeal commodities, every day huge swaths of young adults from the suburbs to Section 8 live their lives by rapper Rick Ross's retro declaration, "Every day I'm hustlin'." Sometimes it seems that passive income and multiple streams have replaced faith, hope, and love as the real theological virtues of modern American civil religion.

The interesting thing, though, is that as universal as the drive to hustle seems to be, there are still deep distinctions among the lived experiences of those who are on the daily grind, often driven by class stratification. Some, with plenty of start-up cash and/or the right pedigree, tend to find themselves rearranging digital products on various screens for huge paydays, while those with less education and often from historically disadvantaged groups find themselves adding backbreaking or mind-numbing labor to their often already torturous shifts and duties, making fractions of what their well-heeled counterparts make at much higher cost to their bodies. Everyone is looking for a payday, but the experiences of those who got an early head start couldn't be more different from those who started with a major delay.

Then we read these words of Jesus, who once again tells a parable that makes long-hidden parts of all of us bristle. The kingdom of heaven is like what, now? Like an unfair boss who pays arbitrary and capricious wages? That may be what it feels like at first read of this passage, but Jesus is kind enough to explain it to us at the end so that the “I got mine and you must get yours” mentality in all of us can be assuaged. (Yes, all of us: thanks in large part to the Protestant work ethic and to notions of meritocracy preached within this society ad nauseam for centuries, we all come to the end of the proverbial workday assuming we have worked more than, and deserve better than, most.)

But this parable challenges that sense of self-satisfaction that so plagues modern Western readers. Jesus doesn't seem to be interested in our warped ways of keeping the life ledger. According to Jesus, in the context of the kingdom of heaven, the last shall be first. Read more widely: the last to join the church or the team isn't the least worthy of having their voice and presence counted. The one who did not receive the same degree is not unworthy of a living wage simply because their labor looks different and some amorphous decider has deemed them “unskilled.” The first shall be last and the last shall be first because, indeed, there is no person who is last or least in the kingdom of heaven.

So, Jesus puts these words into the mouth of the owner of the vineyard: “I am not being unfair to you, friend.” This is where we meet the scandal of grace. God is not being unfair to any of us, no matter what our bean counting and comparison sheets say. Grace is God's prerogative. God can choose to give and bless as God desires. Moreover, the part of the passage that often gives us the most heartburn should be the part that elicits the most praise, once we open our eyes to grace. We must never overlook that the owner keeps going back, keeps choosing more folks, keeps giving more opportunities for those camped out on the side of life to know purpose and joy. The owner does not owe any of them a place in the vineyard, neither the workers who dutifully serve from the break of day nor the ones who are deployed just before quitting time.

Grinding and hustling are not the scourge. Believing that our work somehow makes us better or somehow earns us a better place and prize in the kingdom—this is the real danger hidden in the vineyard.