

The last first: Matthew 20:1-16

by [Craig Kocher](#) in the [September 9, 2008](#) issue

All day long a landowner has been going into the marketplace to hire workers for his vineyard and now only one group remains. The landowner says to the workers, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They respond with one of the most painful lines in all of scripture: "Because no one has hired us." The text does not say why they were not hired. Perhaps they did not have the needed skill set. Maybe they could not speak the language, lacked a proper education or were missing a green card. Maybe they could not afford the increase in gas prices and had to walk, or stayed home that morning with a sick child. Perhaps there simply were not enough jobs to go around. Whatever the reason, they were left out. Like the old man in a rowboat in New Orleans who kept going back into the flooded city, finding more and more people who needed to be rescued, Jesus says, this landowner desperately wants everyone to have a place in the vineyard. He cannot stomach the thought of anybody being left behind, so he says to the last unhired workers, "Go into the vineyard."

When the landowner gives a full day's wage to everybody no matter how long they've worked, who is more startled? Those who barely broke a sweat? Or those who gamely labored all day and now straighten their backs, wide-eyed in anticipation, thinking they will get more than the others? Surprise and anger overcome exhaustion in the latter group. "What kind of business owner are you? Don't you know the basics of incentive and reward? We have sunburns, blisters and pulled muscles. We've kept this silly vineyard operating while you were in the marketplace. Not only do you pay us last but you pay us the same! We deserve better!" The landowner gently reminds them of their agreement, a day's wages for a day's work, and adds, "Can I not do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

Every sophomore in Econ 101 knows that this is no way to make a buck. This is bad business, fuzzy math and flat-out unfair. In the world we know, time plus effort equals production, and production equals *pay*. Those who are in the most demand, the hardest workers with the highest skills, deserve the first and greatest reward.

Yet this parable suggests that in the economy of God's kingdom there is something better than profit margin, greater than incentive and reward, more beautiful than a sharply run business—and that is abundant grace. The story is about a God who wants everyone inside the vineyard, who will not stop rushing out into the marketplace until all have been rounded up, who will not rest until the outsiders, the forgotten and the lonely have been included alongside the skilled, the timely and the hardworking, even if it costs God everything. In their jealousy and rage, those who labored in the vineyard all day long miss the blessing of the vineyard. They forgo an opportunity to make the acquaintance of the landlord and celebrate the harvest of grace.

Then another surprise: In the economy of God's grace those who are hired at the very end, those whom no one else wants, are the closest to God's heart. They are the first recipients of God's generosity. In the economy of grace the last are placed first in line.

Remember when you were on the playground as a child and the captains squared off to choose teams? "I'll take her. I've got him. I suppose you'll do." You sat watching the others get picked and wanted to wave your hand. "Pick me!" We've all been there. Nothing hurts more than feeling as if you have nothing to offer and are looking in from the outside.

We could think about this parable in terms of family life. All of us are somehow a part of a family, and we know that between siblings often there are tensions, with frustrations and pettiness visible to all. Yet parents want their children to feel included regardless of how the children deserve to be treated. The parents of an 18-year-old and an 11-year-old do not love the 18-year-old more because the older child has been in the family vineyard longer. God does not delight in the marriage of two 25-year-olds more than in the marriage of two 65-year-olds simply because the younger couple may have a longer time together. Time plus effort does not translate into just reward in the economy of God's kingdom. Like love, grace does not depend on the worthiness of the one receiving it.

To the unhired workers in the city square, to those who have been forgotten, to all who for whatever reason have been left behind, to all who are crying, "Pick me! Pick me!" God in Jesus Christ responds, "You're hired. Come into the kingdom vineyard and take your place at the front of the line."