

Biases all around (Matthew 20:1-16)

Why does the landowner in Matthew 20 call the laborers lazy?

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September 18, 2026

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It was prom season. High school students were twirling in front of mirrors and family members, showing off their tuxedos and ball gowns. One of those family members, who I know only casually, later reported to a group of us that she was aghast at the dress her grandson's date was wearing: "It was cut down to here," she said, gesturing to her navel, "and up to here," gesturing to her groin. Others joined in with their own assessments of prom fashion, none of them positive. Another chimed in, "I hate to say it, but you know how boys are at that age. Those girls are just asking for it."

I had been silent, nodding along in a noncommittal way, an outsider to this conversation. But something jumped inside me. Suddenly, I could not keep silent. "Women can wear anything they want," I said. "To prom or anywhere else. No woman asks to be harmed." She stammered, quick to agree that no woman wants to be harmed because of her attire and that of course boys are responsible for their behavior. Others nodded their assent. But they were clearly stunned to have their neat blame-the-victim / boys-will-be-boys smugness challenged.

I was as surprised as they were that I spoke up. Their conversation didn't interest or include me. I rarely see this group of women, and I don't really care what they think. But their tired and dangerous assessment that women who dress "provocatively" deserve any harm that comes to them didn't sit well with me that day. If only I were so brave at other times—when racial or ethnic tropes are trotted out as fact, when political views are dismissed as "woke nonsense" or "retrograde Neanderthal." Why don't I speak up then?

Too often, we allow people's biases to go unchallenged, hoping that our silence will be read not as agreement but as displeasure. Most often our silence simply allows the falsehood to stand.

Biases are also barely hidden in the parable, "Realm of Heaven: Labor vs. Management." The biases and prejudices are so common, we mostly don't even notice them.

A vineyard owner, working against the weather, drives to the day labor lot early in the morning to hire pickers for his vines. Time is short; the workload is immense; the workers are not working fast enough. He returns to the lot four more times to hire laborers—at 9 a.m., noon, 3 p.m., and 5 p.m. Even as these grateful-to-work, late-in-the-day laborers pile into the back of the pickup truck, the vineyard owner mocks them, accuses them of "standing idly by."

Are these laborers lazy or idle? Are they lolling in the midday sun for no good reason? The vineyard owner seems to think so, and no one in the parable challenges his assumption.

We know differently: We know that if they were lazy they would have gone home hours ago. Instead, these laborers, still available and wanting to work, must be the otherwise unemployable. They are too young or too old, disabled or disfigured. They would work if they could, but no one will hire them. They aren't lazy. They are less than ideal, laborers of last resort.

Another unspoken bias emerges at the end of the day, when payment is distributed.

Oddly enough, the vineyard owner doesn't compensate the workers as one would expect—the usual daily wage divided by the number of hours worked. Rather, each worker receives a whole day's wage. It seems everyone is surprised at the wad of cash they are handed. Those who worked only part of the day—the undesirable workers—don't protest, but they must wonder if there has been an accounting error. Those who were hired first—the strong and able-bodied—are enraged. They too are biased against the late-in-the-day hires.

At the very moment we are ready to applaud the owner for being more than fair—stupidly generous—he reverts to another of his prejudices. “Am I not allowed to do what I wish with what belongs to me?” What belongs to me?

Rather than defend his pay scale as generosity, he asserts that it is his prerogative as the owner. What, exactly, does he own? The money in his wallet? The workers in his vineyard?

Jesus says that the realm of heaven is like a vineyard owner who hires laborers. In what way, exactly, is the realm of heaven like a landowner who despises his workforce and treats them like slave labor?

This parable is a classic example of Jesus upending expectations and exposing attitudes: of the landowner, the workers, the reader. The realm of heaven is like that—the last first, the first last, everyone surprised.