

The Workers in the Vineyard



Matthew 20:1-16
Year A Proper 20

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	■	▲	▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲	▲	●
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	▲	●
▲	Cleophas - A conscientious disciple whose faith briefly fails him after the death of Jesus	■	▲	●
▲	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence		▲	
●	Jesus			▲

Scene 1

Cleophas , James , Joanna , John

{James and Cleophas are in the middle of a talk.}

James John! John, get over here!

{John enters, along with Joanna.}

John What's up?

James *[with a groan]* Of course, you'd have one of the women with you.

Joanna *[dryly]* If you like, I can leave you men to your talk.

Cleophas No, please stay. You're one of the group members who joined late, like I did. I'd like to hear your opinion.

Joanna All right. My opinion on what?

James John, he wants to leave the group.

John Really? Why?

Cleophas I'm not thinking about leaving completely; just for a while. I'd come back later, if you'd have me.

Joanna So it's not that you've stopped believing that the rabbi is the Messiah?

Cleophas No, no! I believe it as much as I ever did.

James So what's your problem?

Cleophas It's more a question of timing than anything else. When I joined, I thought he was going to declare himself soon, but that didn't happen, and ever since, our numbers have dwindled and it's beginning to look like it's going to be a long haul.

John I can't argue against that. None of us knows how long or winding the road might be - Judas mentioned just the other night that we seem to be going backward these days - but we can absolutely trust in the final destination.

Cleophas I know. It's just that there's a detour I'd like to take before meeting up with you again.

Joanna Where are you planning to go?

Cleophas I'd like to try visiting my daughter. She was married just before I joined the group, and now she lives way up in xxx. At the time, I thought it was the perfect moment to leave my old life - my wife passed away a few years before that, and now my only child was beginning her new life - but I've been missing her lately. When I thought the Kingdom was imminent, I knew there wouldn't be time to visit her - I'm not even sure she still lives in xxx, so it could take some time to track her down - but now that it looks like the Kingdom's further off than I thought, I just might take this opportunity. I'd come back right after.

Joanna In that case, we wish you and your daughter all the best, and we'll look forward to having you with us again.

John Amen to that.

James [*painfully*] Look, Cleophas, you're your own man and you can do what you want, but I really think you should stay.

Cleophas Don't worry, I'll be back.

James But you might not be! You might miss the Day entirely. It might come sooner than you think.

Cleophas Well, then I'll rejoin you in the middle of the fight, or after the Kingdom's been established. The rabbi says it'll last forever, right?

James But how will he see you at that point? As one of the original group who joined him from the start, or a latecomer who's just hopping on the band wagon?

John What difference does it make?

James None to me. I'm just trying to look out for Cleophas' interests.

Joanna What difference should it make to him?

James [*argumentatively*] Don't you think it's going to make a difference when people joined? The one's who were here first are surely going to receive a greater reward.

John But I thought we already established that the greatest figures in the Kingdom won't necessarily be the ones who joined first, or even did the most.

James [*impatiently*] Yes, yes, but I'm not talking about stature, but simple rewards.

Cleophas I never saw myself as worthy to receive a big reward, anyway.

James Okay, "rewards" was a bad choice of words. Think of it as compensation, as what you earn. Think of it this way: Suppose a landowner goes out one morning and hires a group of workers to bring in his harvest. Then, in the middle of the day, he hires another group, and then late in the day, with just an hour of daylight left, one final bunch. Now, none of them are any "greater" than any others, and the landowner treats them all with equal respect, but at the end of the day, the men who had been out there in the fields the longest are naturally going to get paid

more. It's just common sense!

John I'm not sure employment is the best model to use.

Cleophas Yeah, I'm certainly not expecting compensation, either.

James You're just not getting what I'm trying to say!

Joanna *[thoughtfully]* You know, I think I kind of get it.

Cleophas You're agreeing with James? That's a first.

Joanna Well, I don't think the employment and payment are the right ways to approach this, either, but something about this parable of workers in the field does touch me.

John Parable?

Joanna Sure. I actually think it has the depth and open-endedness of some of the parables the rabbi teaches.

James *[not sure how to take a compliment from Joanna]* Uh...thanks.

Joanna The aspect of the story that got me thinking was the landowner having to hire more men in the afternoon and then even more in the evening. *[rhetorically]* Why would he do that?

John *[guessing the answer]* Because the work was falling behind!

Joanna Exactly. Half way through the day, the work was far from half done. And by the time evening rolled around, there was still a ton of work to do.

Cleophas I see what you mean. Never mind the rewards: how can I quit the field when the harvest is so urgent?

John The fact that our numbers are dwindling and we seem to be putting off the Day doesn't make the situation less urgent. In a sense, it makes it more urgent!

Cleophas I hadn't thought of that, either. *[to James]* That's a pretty nifty parable you just told. How did you think of it?

James Hey, I've been with the rabbi from the start. John and I were his first followers!

John *[interrupting]* After Peter and Phillip.

James Yeah, whatever. In any case, we've been here from the start, and we've picked up some things in that time. That's another reason you should stay, by the way.

Joanna It's your choice, Cleophas. What do you think?

Scene 2

Cleophas , James , Joanna , John , Phillip

{Phillip enters toward the end of the previous scene's conversation.}

Phillip Hey, everybody. Are you talking about the rabbi's sermon?

Cleophas No, I was telling them that I'm thinking of taking a break from the group. Though I'm not so sure now.

John Which sermon are you talking about, and why did you think we were discussing it?

Phillip The sermon he preached this morning. But I don't remember any of you being there.

Joanna That's because we weren't.

James He sent me and John into the town for supplies. Otherwise, we would have been there.

Cleophas *[anxiously]* Did the rabbi preach against people leaving the group?

Phillip No, he told a parable about workers being hired for a harvest, and I thought I overheard you talking about workers and harvests a minute ago.

John We were!

Phillip Oh, so you'd already heard it.

Joanna Was it about men being hired at different times of the day?

Phillip Yeah, that's the one. I guess he must have preached it before and I missed it.

James Hey, I wasn't stealing from the rabbi! I made it up on my own!

John Amazing. Has anybody else ever heard the rabbi tell that parable?

everybody *[everybody ad-libs "No"]*

Cleophas *[in amazement]* James thought it up on his own just hours after the rabbi preached it!

James *[proudly]* Me and the rabbi, thinking alike!

Joanna So Phillip, did the rabbi say anything about the parable? Did he explain the lesson it was supposed to teach?

Phillip No. As usual, he just put it out there and left it at that.

John But it began with a landowner hiring men to bring in his harvest?

{If possible, James should echo the final phrase of Phillip's next line.}

Phillip Right. In the morning. And then in the afternoon, he hires another group of men. And then one more group in the evening, just **an hour before sunset**.

James **An hour before sunset!** That's it! That's it exactly!

Cleophas What happens at the end of the day? Did he talk about paying the workers?

Phillip Yup. That turned out to be the whole point of the parable, and it sure got the crowd buzzing!

John Buzzing? Why would they think the ending was something to buzz about?

Phillip I did, too! Don't you? Didn't it totally surprise you? Oh, I forgot, you never heard it. How does James' version end?

Joanna *[suddenly realizing the truth]* Oh my God! *[to Phillip]* In the rabbi's version, the landowner pays them all the same, doesn't he?

Phillip Yup, that was the big ending, all right.

Cleophas Wow!

James Wait, what?

John As usual, the rabbi eludes our expectations!

Phillip What's wrong? What's going on?

James *[trying to salvage his ending]* Did he say outright that they all got paid the same, or did he just say they all got paid?

Phillip They all got paid the same, and some of them complained about it. That was part of the parable.

James But that's ridiculous! That's not how the world works at all!

Joanna *[uncertainly]* It seems to be how the Kingdom will work.

Cleophas Wait a minute. *[to Phillip]* You say that he preached this parable to a crowd of outsiders?

Phillip Yeah, mostly. There were only a few of us there.

Cleophas Maybe it's the version of the parable that he would preach to inquirers. You know, so they'd be encouraged that they could join up at this late date and still be rewarded like the rest of us.

James But that can't be true!

Joanna I wonder if he would have used James' ending instead, if he had been speaking just to us.

Phillip That sounds kind of dishonest.

John Not at all. It would be teaching two small pieces of an enormous, complex reality. We should run James' version by the rabbi and see what he thinks.

Phillip "Dueling parables." Awesome!

Scene 3

Cleophas , James , Jesus , Joanna , John

{The disciples find Jesus and ask him about the parables.}

Jesus No. Sorry, but it just wouldn't work that way. The workers have to be paid the same.

{There's a long, shocked silence.}

John Uh, you mean for the purposes of this morning's sermon, right?

Jesus For any sermon I can imagine.

Cleophas Even one with just this group as the audience?

Jesus Absolutely.

James But rabbi, it's not fair!

Jesus How so?

James The men who were hired in the morning worked all day, while the ones hired in the evening only worked an hour. The original group endured the heat of the day, while the latecomers didn't arrive until dusk. How can you pay them all the same?

Jesus Every worker was offered a wage, and happily accepted it. And at the end of the day, they were all paid what was promised to them.

Joanna *[with a sudden thought]* Rabbi, was it because of the greater urgency as the day wore on? Did the landowner have to offer more pay because he got more and more desperate for extra hands to complete the harvest in time?

Jesus No, this Landowner knows no desperation, for He holds all the hours in His hands and knows the fate of every soul.

James *[growing more and more angry]* Then what's the point of signing on right away (when nobody else was willing!) and bearing the brunt of the hardship and the risk? What's the point of being smarter and nobler and braver than all those fools chasing...pleasure and wealth and reputation? Why not just live your life however you want and wait until the last minute and waltz on in and collect the same reward? It's not right!

Jesus *[gently]* James, James. I've done you no wrong. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Am I not allowed to be generous? *[soberly to all]* So the last will be first, and the first will be last. For many shall be called, but few chosen.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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