

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers - *Living from the generosity of God*

Good morning everyone. What a privilege it is to be speaking with you this morning. For those who don't know me, my name is Hayley, and I love being part of the team here at St George's. A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that I wear a few different hats around the church, particularly in the women's and kids' spaces, and one of the newer hats that's been added to the hat stand is the opportunity to share with you occasionally, so that's the hat I'm wearing today and I am looking forward to speaking with you this morning.

Before I begin, let's pray.

Prayer – God we thank you for this time we can spend in worship together. We ask that you shape our hearts through your Word and by your Spirit this morning.

And Lord may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight,

Amen

So last week on Friday night, Steve and I spontaneously bought tickets for the Sunday night Split Enz concert! It was awesome, so much musical talent, and the amount of fun they were having on stage was contagious. But I'm not here to rave about how good the concert was, but because I was struck by the lyrics of one of the songs they performed right at the end of the evening — *Straight Old Line*. I'm not sure I had actually heard it before but as soon as the chorus began, I found myself connecting it straight to this parable:

“Don't look to the left, don't look to the right, just stick to the straight old line.”

It made me realise how challenging that feels in the world we live in today.

So much of life pulls our attention sideways: what other people are doing, what they have, how they seem to be succeeding, why we're not where we thought we'd be by now, why I've been dealt these set of life cards, etc - I'm sure you could keep going with a myriad of questions like these.

And as our attention shifts left and right, comparison quietly begins to shape not only how we see the people around us, but also how we see ourselves, and in the process we begin to lose sight of the goodness and generosity of God.

In this parable — and thank you, Gina, for reading it so beautifully — the workers begin the day grateful. But the moment they start looking sideways at what others are given, gratitude gives way to resentment. Jesus does not leave that unaddressed. He gently exposes it, reminding them that His kingdom does not operate like the world around us. In His kingdom, grace is not measured, compared, or earned — it is generously given.

And so He invites them, and us, back into something better. Back to the way of abundant love and generosity, the Straight Old Line. By remaining attentive to Him, trusting in His

goodness, and faithfully walking the path He has set before us, gratitude is restored, joy is rediscovered, and we are freed to flourish in Him.

1. The Pull of Comparison

So Jesus begins the parable by drawing on a scene His listeners would have known well, the everyday world of a vineyard owner and his workers. Vineyard owners came in all kinds — some fair and generous, others harsh and exploitative, and His listeners would have immediately recognised the reality of that world.

The workers, too, would have been familiar figures. These day labourers were among the most vulnerable in society, living from one day to the next and dependent on being hired each morning simply to provide for their families. No work meant no income, and no certainty of being able to put food on the table that evening.

So there were the workers hired at the beginning of the day, who would have definitely been relieved to have secured a full day's work. But then imagine, too, the relief of those hired later in the day, after hours spent waiting in the marketplace, uncertain but hopeful, wondering whether anyone would choose them at all. Again and again, the landowner returns, continuing to bring more people into the vineyard. Even at this stage of Jesus' story, the landowner's generosity would already have seemed unexpected.

Interestingly, I wonder whether the first workers hired may initially have felt quite grateful when the afternoon workers arrived. Perhaps the landowner had recognised that the workload was too great for them alone, and by bringing in others he was easing the burden of those who had been there since dawn.

But then the parable takes a surprising turn. Not only does the landowner continue to generously hire labourers throughout the day, but at the end he chooses to pay all of them the same wage, regardless of when they began.

And this is where everything shifts. When the labourers who had worked all day see that everyone receives the same wage, something begins to stir in them. Instead of being thankful that they were still receiving exactly what they had agreed to or grateful that their burden had been lightened, they begin to grumble.

It's a bit like children at the dinner table complaining, "Mum, how is that fair? I did way more of the dishes and he still gets the same amount of ice cream as me!"

The joy of getting dessert quickly fades, because their attention shifts. They are no longer receiving what they've been given with gratitude, they are fixated on what is in someone else's bowl.

That is exactly what happens in the parable. Nothing has actually changed for the first labourers, they are not short-changed, they still receive exactly what they agreed to. But the moment they begin looking sideways, gratitude gives way to grumbling.

So let's take a quick look at the word Matthew uses here "grumbling." The Greek word used is *gongyzō*, and interestingly this also means to carry the sense of a hidden, sullen discontent. This is insightful to what Jesus is warning us about through this parable. It's not just the complaining or moaning but also the feelings that don't often come out loudly or openly, but quietly sits beneath the surface.

We can probably all relate to this, whether in the age of social media, or earlier through things like women's weekly magazines and stories about other people's lives. And as we look left and right, comparison can quietly creep in under the surface, eroding gratitude and stealing our joy. As the saying goes, comparison is the thief of joy.

2. The Distortion of Comparison

I could share many moments where I've carried a quiet, hidden discontent, especially in the early years of choosing to stay at home as a mum. There was the constant comparison with other mums who were working, the subtle questioning of whether I was doing it "right," and the pressure to feel like I was enough or doing enough, a slow rumbling under the surface that was shifting my attention away from the straight old road. It meant I often found myself trying to prove my worth or justify my choices and I'd be thinking "if they can do all of that... why can't I?" or "They seem to have it all together, I should too."

So I began saying yes to more and more, trying to keep up, until eventually I burned out. But after getting some help and refocusing my attention on God, He gently showed me that I was not being asked to strive to become someone else or define my life by theirs. Like the hymn I remember from my childhood, I was invited to "turn my eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and all the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace." Shifting my focus to Him, I could listen for His leading and faithfully walk the path He had placed before me. As I did, I learned that I could trust His goodness and generosity to provide all the strength and love I needed. I didn't have to work harder, but simply respond to Him and trust His generosity.

And this is exactly what unfolds in the parable. What begins as grumbling is revealed to be something deeper at work beneath the surface. It is not simply frustration about fairness, but a heart quietly shaped by comparison — and what rises up is envy. Jesus does not leave it unnamed or unchallenged. Instead, He brings it into the light and gently exposes what has been happening within them. He does this through the conversation between the landlord and those first labourers.

So let me read what he says again (Matthew 20:13–16):

"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend.

Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.

I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous."

The Kingdom of Heaven does not operate like the world around us. Grace is not measured, compared, or earned — it is generously given.

One more interesting observation of the Greek translation I noticed is the use of the word *envious*. The phrase that was translated from Greek to English was actually *ophthalmos ponēros* “is your eye evil because I am good?” Back then the “evil eye” actually described a distorted way of seeing. And this is what comparison and envy does. It distorts our vision so that we begin to see God’s generosity toward others not simply as a blessing for them, but as a sign that something must be lacking in our own lives.

When our perspective is distorted, when we start looking left and right, we’re turning away and losing sight of the goodness of the path God has placed before us. Slowly, gratitude is replaced by grumbling, or that sullen discontent, not because God has moved away, but because comparison and envy has shifted our attention away from Him.

The truth is, we rarely see the full reality of another person’s life, and often do not fully understand our own either. So how can we possibly think that we could measure worth or compare callings in the first place?

In the kingdom of God, we are not called to compete or compare, but to trust and live from His generosity.

3. The Invitation to Abide

So if we are to live from this abundant and generous grace of God, and remain on the straight old line He has set before us, how do we keep our eyes fixed on Christ when it is so easy to look left and right?

Jesus’ invitation in this parable is simple: to receive God’s grace with gratitude and allow it to shape how we see our lives and our calling.

And this is really what we mean when we say we are a Place of Grace here at St George’s, a people who remember that each one of us is here only by the grace of God, with no one above another, all of us held within the same generosity of Christ.

Over the past few weeks, we’ve been looking at the parables and considering how they shape the way we live, both as a church community and as individuals. There is a real sense of the Holy Spirit at work among us, and we want to be attentive to that movement. We want to be ready to respond, like setting our sails to catch the wind, or sitting on our surfboards watching for the right wave.

So the question becomes: how do we live this out in practice, not just as something we talk about, but as something that shapes how we see people, how we serve, and how we live together?

Just as a vineyard owner requires workers at different times and in different roles, God entrusts His people with different gifts, responsibilities, in different seasons of life. None of these are greater than another, each is simply faithfulness in its own place.

And we truly flourish when we stop looking left and right, stop measuring ourselves or our community against others, and instead remain in Christ, abiding in Him like branches in the vine.

Jesus says in John 15,

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you abide in me.”

If we spend all our time looking at the “apple tree” over there, we can slowly lose sight of our own connection to Christ. Instead of nurturing our life in the vine, we begin to neglect it, and before long, we start to dry up. As Jesus says, a branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains in the vine. Apart from Him, we lose our life-source and begin to wither. But when we remain in Him, He grows in us the fruit that is right for our lives, in His time and in His way.

And this is the invitation running through the whole parable: to remain attentive to Jesus, trust His generosity.

It means recognising that walking the straight old line will look different in each of our lives and in the life of our church. Some seasons involve leadership, visibility, and responsibility; others are quieter seasons of faithfulness, rest, or healing. But all of them are held within the goodness of God as we remain attentive and obedient to Him.

So in light of that, what does faithful obedience look like in this season, here at St George’s, and in your own life?

This morning I’m so pleased to welcome Anne forward to share a little of her journey here at St George’s. It feels especially fitting to ask Anne to share with us this morning, because Anne is a maths teacher, in fact, a teacher of teachers. And if this parable teaches us anything, it’s that God’s maths doesn’t always add up the way we expect. Anne, it’s great to have you with us...

Thank you so much for sharing your journey with us, Anne. It is such a gift to witness the ways God has been at work in your life, and the attentiveness with which you have responded to His leading and you generously offer your time, gifts, and energy across so many areas of our church community.

As we come to a close, let’s revisit what we’ve heard through the Parable of the Vineyard Workers.

We are reminded that God’s kingdom does not operate according to our human instincts of fairness, comparison, or achievement. His grace is generous, unexpected, and life-giving —

not earned. And when we begin to live from that truth, something shifts in us. We are released from constantly looking left and right, no longer driven by the pressure to measure ourselves against others, and instead freed to faithfully live into the life-path God has entrusted to us.

We become countercultural — a people who no longer compete, but encourage; no longer compare, but celebrate. We can confidently speak life into those around us, and into our own hearts. This is what it means to be shaped by Christ: not striving to prove ourselves, but abiding in Him and allowing His love to flow through us.

So as we head out to the week ahead, let's have a think about Where might we be drawn into comparison rather than resting in the generosity of God and recognising the goodness and gifts He has placed in our lives?

And what might it look like for us, as a church community, and individually to help cultivate more deeply a Place of Grace, through the way we encourage, serve, welcome, and walk alongside one another?