

Matthew 20:1-16

Aim of lesson

To show that God is loving and generous, and that we should not question his wisdom.

Background study

Matthew 19:6-30; Luke 17:10; Romans 6:23; Romans 9:20. Look into methods of vine-cultivation in Bible times.

Suggested outline of lesson

Reward by grace not works.

This is a difficult parable to teach children because it is concerned with a kind of thinking that is contrary to human reasoning. Consequently, you must have a clear idea of the message. This is why the context of Matthew 19 is important; it leads into Jesus' illustration of service and reward. Note the question of the young man (19:16) followed by Jesus' answer, and the question that this produced from Peter. Both questions reflected the human idea of reward for efforts. Jesus wished to show that God's "reward" is by grace, and not earned by works.

Vineyards

If available, a bunch of grapes could be used both as a visual aid and a starting point. Failing this a good picture would do. Let the children share some of the grapes, and then talk about them. Ask if they know how grapes grow: some children may have seen them growing in greenhouses. Extend the discussion by drawing on any knowledge that the children might have of the cultivation of grapes in Mediterranean countries today, and what they know about vineyards in the Middle East in the past. Build up a picture of the vineyard enclosed by a wall for protection or growing on terraces, with luxuriant vines bearing huge clusters of grapes; the winepresses and vats hewn out of the rock, the tending of the vines by hired workers, and various other tasks. Describe the time of the harvest and the treading of the grapes during long, hard but happy days of work by the hired men.

Called to work in the vineyard

Recount how the owner left his vineyard and went into the market place where people gathered who wanted work, and where business was usually transacted. There he engaged some labourers to work for him. The word "idle", or "doing nothing" (20:6) simply means unemployed. Note that it was the owner of the vineyard who sought them, and not they who sought the owner, and that all who were called accepted willingly and readily. Emphasize the different times of day when new workers were called. Those called early in the day made an agreement for a fixed sum. Do not become involved in how much a

denarius is worth by today's reckoning. Sufficient to say that it was a silver coin paid for a full day's work. Make the point that the arrangements were different for each transaction.

The labourers are paid by the vineyard owner

The conclusion of the story presents an opportunity for imaginative description. Describe the scene at the end of the day as the sun was setting and the men, tired but satisfied, left their work, dressed and assembled to receive their wages. Convey the reaction of the various labourers - those first in line would be surprised and overjoyed at being so well paid, but those paid last would naturally assume that they would receive more than one denarius.

Fair ? unfair ?

At this point let the children convey their reaction. There will probably be a good deal of sympathy in the class for those who had worked all day long. Some may even say that it was unfair, as did the workers. Emphasize strongly the stern reproach of the master. At the end of the story make it clear that there were three ways in which those who grumbled were wrong: firstly, they had entered into an agreement which had been

honoured; secondly, they had no right to challenge the decision of the owner of the vineyard because he was the master and they were servants; thirdly, they were at fault in comparing themselves with the others and in being jealous.

God has the right to choose the reward

Remind the children that Jesus told his stories for a specific purpose. Try to draw from them the fact that in the story God is represented by the master. It is he who calls people to his service, and he who will reward them all in his wisdom and by his grace with his gift of eternal life, whether they have served him for a long or a short period of time.

Worksheets

The code reads 'The free gift of God is eternal life'.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we thank you for the gift of Jesus, who teaches us how to think and how to behave. Help us to be the kind of boys and girls you want us to be, so that we can prepare to receive your great gift of living with Jesus in his kingdom. Amen.

Memory verse

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Relevance to the children's lives

Many people today grumble when others appear to have more than they themselves. The words "it's not fair" are often heard. Next time you hear yourself saying "it's not fair", stop and think. Is it really not fair, or are you just comparing what you have with that of somebody else? If we wish God to choose us, we should be learning to think less of ourselves and more about the kind of people God wants us to be.