

# Affirmative Action and the Gospel

*A sermon on Matthew 20:1-16 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 September 2023*

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## Message

In order to recognise and cooperate with what God is doing, we often need to recognise and see past the assumptions that come with our own privilege.

## Sermon

Of all the parables Jesus ever told, the one we heard tonight about the boss hiring workers for his vineyard tends to evoke some of the strongest negative feelings in us, feelings of protest and outrage. It just seems really obviously wrong to us, quite unfair even, and it can leave us feeling confused and even offended and angry.

The last time I preached on this parable was six years ago, and it was one of those occasions when I had half written a sermon when I suddenly noticed a whole new angle on it and had to scrap the sermon and start again. On that occasion it was because we were in the middle of the heated campaign leading up to the same-sex marriage plebiscite, and I suddenly realised that this parable shed some significant light on the nature of the anger that many who opposed same-sex marriage were feeling. This time round we are again in the middle of a heated campaign leading up to a national vote on a contentious issue, and once again, I'm seeing a connection to this parable. It's not the same connection though, so it will be a quite different sermon, but if you want to revisit the previous one, [here's the link to it](#).

Having said that, I'm going to have to focus on the parable itself for a while before I get to anything it might have to say about the current referendum campaigns, so you'll have to bear with me on that.

A quick recap of the story first. At grape picking time, the owner of a vineyard needs his grapes picked, so he goes to the town square where the casual day labourers gather hoping to be given work for the day, and he hires a bunch of workers. As the day goes on, he keeps going back and hiring some more. He does this so many times that at knock-off time, he has got some workers who've worked 12 hours, some 9, some 6, some 3, and some only one. But when he hands out the wages, he pays everyone the same; a full day's pay, regardless of how long they had worked. Not surprisingly, those who had actually worked a full 12 hours are pretty pissed off that they didn't get any more than those who only worked an hour. But Jesus says that the culture of heaven is like what that vineyard owner did.

Most of us chafe at this parable, precisely because we identify with the workers who worked the full twelve hours, and we feel that they've been ripped off. The concept of equal pay for equal work is a concept worth fighting for, is it not? And it has had to be fought for, even in recent years. There have been important campaigns to ensure that women are paid the same as men if they do the same work, and that unscrupulous employers can't replace their workforce with a bunch of refugee labourers who are desperate and will accept poor wages because they have little choice. Equal work means equal pay, and it matters. And that implies that unequal work should receive unequal pay. Someone who does only half the work gets only half the pay.

So if that principle is so obviously fair, why does Jesus not respect it? Why does he tell stories that upend it and that commend an employer who violates it?

Well, perhaps that equal work/equal pay principle only seems so obviously fair and right to us because we are reading it from a quite privileged social position which blinds us to a whole bunch of other considerations. And perhaps exposing our privileged assumptions is precisely what this parable is doing.

You see, if you were a bicycle courier delivering food for Uber Eats or something, especially prior to the recently approved reforms, and you were running yourself into the ground everyday trying to fit in enough deliveries to pay your rent and grocery bills, I think you might hear this story differently. In the days of Jesus, and still in many industries in many parts of the world today, there are large pools of casual day labourers, who have to queue up everyday and hope there are enough people hiring to ensure they get work for the day. In most cases, there are more workers available than there is work to be done, and that means the bosses can afford to offer rock-bottom wages because there are always labourers willing to accept poor wages rather than no wages. With rent to pay and families to feed, the workers are desperate for whatever wages they can get. And if they only get a half a days work, or a couple of hours work, they've still got 100% of their living expenses to pay, and not enough to pay it with.

So how does the parable sound when read from that perspective? I find it quite difficult to do because that's never really been my experience. It is a long time since I had to worry about making ends meet, and even back when I sometimes did, I really didn't have much to worry about. I was a white, educated, able-bodied, heterosexual, male, so I was always given a go. I never really had the experience of being constantly overlooked while others around me were favoured.

So people like me find it very easy to make harsh judgements about these workers, just like the privileged landowner in the parable did. Going out in the middle of the day and seeing more workers without jobs, he says, "What are you doing standing out here idle all day?"

For those of us who've never been in that position, it is an easy judgment to make. Those who are not working are lazy and idle. They're just standing around when they could be working hard like us. They are not working because they didn't have enough initiative to get out there at 6:00am with everyone else when the labour hire contractors were recruiting for the day. They missed out because they were lazy and unprepared.

Oh really? It is so easy to judge when we don't have lived experience of living with next to nothing. Perhaps some of them were not out there until after 9:00am because there was no one else to get the kids off to school. Perhaps some of them are waiting out there at midday or 3:00pm because they got hired at 6:00am and then dismissed at 10 because the boss overestimated the work available, so with only a third of a day's pay, they are desperately hoping to pick up a second shift. Perhaps some of those who are still looking for work at 5pm are the hardest workers of all and have already done an eight or ten hour shift but for the sake of their families are hoping to pick up another few hours while the sun is still up.

Most of these day labourers are not lazy bludgers but willing labourers who live and work in the precarious space at the bottom of the hierarchy because it suits the lords of the economy to keep them there to ensure that there is an endless supply of cheap casual labour to keep

the wheels turning and the profits rolling in. And as often as not, the oversupply of labour that suits the captains of industry so well means that these casual labourers are left behind, with no work or only a few hours of work for the day, and they go home in despair because they still have at least a day's pay's worth of bills to pay and mouths to feed, but little or nothing to cover it.

So how does the parable that Jesus tells sound now, from this perspective? We might still want to question the fairness of not paying the 12 hour workers a substantial bonus, but what we have now is a boss who is doing his utmost to ensure that as many of these hand-to-mouth labourers as possible are receiving a proper living wage, a pay packet that gives them a reasonable chance of paying their rent and putting a decent meal on the table for their families.

The boss had promised the early starters the standard day's wage. They got it. Those who came later, he simply promised to "pay what is right." It turns out that his idea of what is right was not determined by how much work he got out of them, but by what they needed to survive and care for their families. A decent living wage for all.

In a way, it is a reflection of what was going on in our first reading about God providing manna, bread from heaven, to the Israelite people in the desert. We are told that they were to collect enough for each day, and that if they tried to work harder to collect more and stockpile it, it went off and left them with nothing. No one had too much or too little. Similarly Jesus teaches us to pray for enough bread for each day, not for enough plus interest so that we can sell it and become rich.

Now what does any of this have to do with the upcoming referendum? Hang in there with me. I'm nearly there, but not quite.

Closely related to the orthodox economic principle of equal pay for equal work is another principle, about merit based employment. It says that we should always employ the person who has the best set of skills and experience for the job, without allowing other factors like race or gender to sway our decision. This is another one of those things that seems self-evidently good and right and true until we start asking similar questions about whether our privileged social position is blinding us to the real effects this principle.

Because it turns out that just as we saw with our too-quick judgements of the "idle" workers in the parable, this principle too is actually protecting an unequal status quo. There would be plenty of workers among the day labourers in this parable who, given the opportunity and support, could excel at much higher status and highly paid jobs, but the system denies them the opportunity because with no savings and with hungry mouths to feed, they could never do the study or buy the clothes or get the references. We have qualified doctors and engineers stacking shelves and mopping floors in this country because they are refugees who do not have the resources to get their qualifications validated to Australian standards.

But every time some program of affirmative action is proposed to try to open up opportunities to those who have been systematically shut out of the system, you will hear people screaming about merit based employment and arguing that affirmative action is a form of unfair discrimination against those who already have the skills and training and experience. But over and over we find that privilege actually perpetuates itself by creating

these orthodox ideologies that justify our privilege and denigrate those beneath us in the social hierarchies.

Which brings me to the forthcoming referendum on establishing a permanent constitutionally enshrined Aboriginal Voice to parliament.

One of the difficulties in talking about the issues in the referendum is that although the Yes case is relatively simple, talking about “the No case” is a bit complicated and even misleading, because there isn’t really a single No case. There are about a dozen or so different No cases, including some that have almost persuaded me. So what I am about to say about one of the No arguments doesn’t necessarily invalidate some of the others.

But one of the major arguments being pushed by the main official No campaign, is that the establishing of the Voice divides the Australian population into different groups with different rights. It argues that it would treat Aboriginal people differently from non-Aboriginal people by giving them a kind of voice to parliament that no one else in Australia gets. It singles them out for special treatment and amplifies their voice above that of the rest of the population. It is a form of affirmative action that therefore discriminates against those who are not being singled out for a helping hand.

At the simplest level of facts, that argument is true. It will give Aboriginal people a special right that isn’t given to others. But as we have seen with today’s parable, the assumption that that is automatically and obviously a bad thing needs to be questioned. Is it perhaps another one of these things that only seems self-evidently wrong because we are looking at it from a place of unexamined privilege and ignoring the structural injustices that are presently baked into the system?

And surely that is the case here. Affirmative action is surely justified whenever we recognise that the system has been unfairly maintaining barriers that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for certain groups of people to participate equally in the system.

So if we can recognise that Aboriginal people have had their voices structurally excluded from the parliamentary decision making processes of this country, then surely this parable from Jesus tells us that the culture of heaven would call us to embark on some sort of affirmative action to overcome that structural exclusion. If treating every voice as equal, like simple equality of pay, is not actually ensuring genuine equality because the system itself undermines the equality, then it is time to do something about it, and that means recognising which group of voices has been left standing idle in the marketplace while we were benefitting richly from our illusion of equality. We need to single them out for “special” treatment that actually lifts them up to a level playing field.

Our parable tells us that Jesus says that such “special treatment” actually reflects the culture of God, the kingdom of heaven.

And, even if we might sometimes initially chafe against such practices when we’ve been among the privileged ones for whom our illusion of equality was paying off nicely, ultimately we can all be very thankful that this is how God operates. Because if gaining access to the fullness of life and love in God depended on us being able to do the hard work of identifying our own privileges and blindnesses, and unravel the cords of structural injustice in our world,

none of us would ever make it. But we have a God who is not willing to leave anyone in the marketplace, languishing with nothing. We have a God who is more than willing to overturn what we thought were the normal rules of fairness in order to lift us out of our spiritual poverty and offer us meaningful work and reward us as the equals of the greatest saints of history. And having lifted us up and showered us with blessings we could never have earned in a full day, let alone in the final hour, God calls us to go and do likewise in the world and in our nation.