

Vineyard Inc.

Hespeler, September 20, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians 1:21-30, [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

About a year ago, the Chief Executive Officer of Vineyard Incorporated decided to make a big move to boost profits. He utilized Artificial Intelligence models to automate many of the processes that kept his business running.

He put an AI agent in charge of his supply chain, managing the intricate system that made sure that everything that he needed to produce his product arrived just in time. He put AI agents in charge of answering his phones and responding to all questions and orders. He had another AI agent running the production fields, managing cultivation, fertilization and monitoring for pests and ripeness.

Generative AI was also put to work creating advertisements and a social media strategy, flooding the internet with posts.

Low Labour Costs

The CEO congratulated himself that these initiatives allowed him to lower his payroll drastically. He went down to the labour market and hired just a few people to prompt the AI and to take the blame for any mistakes that it made. He promised to pay them one denarius, which seemed far too much for what he was asking them to do, but he recognized that he needed to keep at least a skeleton crew on hand.

Now, it was the nature of Vineyard Incorporated's business that its earnings all came at once. For most of the year, there was just the constant cost of keeping the operation running, but the crucial harvest season was when all the profits came in to cover the costs and make a big fat bonus out of the rest.

Big Savings

The CEO watched with glee throughout the year as the numbers came in. Costs were down across the board, which meant that when the profits finally came in, the bonus would be huge. He could hardly wait!

For example, the cost of the advertising they were creating was down 80% because there was no need to pay graphic artists or creative directors. What did it matter that it all looked like AI slop and there was nothing to set it apart from advertising that every other company was doing? It was so cheap that they could put it everywhere.

And so it all went until the long-anticipated earnings season came. As soon as the AI sensors indicated the grapes were ready to harvest, the CEO ordered someone to push the button to get the harvesting equipment ready.

Problems

That was when the CEO realized that his reliance on AI might have created some problems. It turned out that people weren't engaged by advertisement that was just AI slop. The CEO realized that he would have to reduce prices in order to engage his customer base.

And then, the customer service AI hallucinated an offer for a product that didn't exist, resulting in the need to process numerous refunds. And it turned out that the monitoring AI had also failed to



properly detect an infestation of a particularly troublesome pest – something that the old, experienced hands would have picked up on right away.

That was not even the worst problem that was surfacing. The AI company that had sold him the agents in the first place realized he was utterly dependent on them for his entire operation. They jacked up their prices and threatened to walk away with all his operational data if he did not pay.

Last Minute Hiring

So it was that, at the last minute, the CEO realized that the only thing that would save his earnings season was if he went and hired a labour force that could deal with all of the problems that were coming to light. In fact, he might just end up hiring more people than he would have in an ordinary season before all of his cost-saving initiatives.

He went to the labour marketplace, but it was very difficult to find people who were willing to work for him and clean up the big mess. The only workers he could find were temporary foreign workers who had been brought in for the season.

The good news was that these workers worked very hard for low pay. The bad news was that the temporary agency that managed and obtained them charged fees that were so high that it cost as much for one of them to work for the season as it would have cost to hire an ordinary worker for the whole year.

He Thinks He Did a Good Job

In the end, the CEO had to explain the whole debacle to his board. And so, he went in and told them what a good manager he was. He explained that he had made bold moves by cutting the cost of labour and that, even though profits were down over the whole season, his discipline of the workforce would surely bear long-term fruit. The entire board laughed at his very bad pun.

After that, they decided to use the money that they had received from the recent government tariff refunds to fund a huge stock buyback to boost their stock price. They ended the quarter with big bonuses all around.

Meanwhile, back in the vineyard, the few workers who remained after all the temporary workers had left looked around at the ragged vines. Expert hands were needed to prune and prepare them for the next season, and they knew that they had lost such expertise. It looked like next year's harvest would be even more dismal.

Traditional Interpretation

The traditional interpretation of Jesus' Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, as you may know, is to see it as an allegory.

The owner of the vineyard is seen as God. The workers who start at the beginning of the day are seen as the Jews, who have a long-term relationship with God through the Law. The workers who come later in the day are the Gentiles who come to faith in God through Jesus later.

This is, to be clear, a perfectly valid way to read the parable. I do not doubt that the early church read it that way. They used this parable to work through the issues they had regarding feelings of resentment between Jews and Gentiles within the church regarding the keeping of the law. That may even be the main reason why Matthew included this parable in his Gospel.

More Than One Interpretation

But the powerful thing about the parables of Jesus is that they are never meant to be read just one way. And the people who heard Jesus tell it the first time wouldn't have been thinking about the tensions between Jews and Gentiles that wouldn't surface for several decades.

Instead, they would have heard a story that would have sounded pretty familiar to them – a story about labourers and the people who employed them. In fact, many of them would have been such labourers who had come straight from working in the fields to listen to Jesus tell this story. They had only just been paid the usual rate of one denarius a day for their work.

Because of that other, commonly accepted allegorical interpretation of this parable, there are people who would say that this parable is not allowed to be a commentary on capitalism or on the relationship between workers and owners. But I say that, if you are telling the Bible what it is and is not allowed to mean, you are probably interpreting it wrong.

So, I have always been willing to see this parable as having something to say about economic issues and how they affect our lives here and now, and not just about what happens after we die.

Shifts in Attitude

Our world has shifted enormously over the last few decades. Back in the 50s and 60s, it was taken for granted by most that workers, those who did the labour and contributed their time, energy and talents to production, made a worthwhile contribution to what was produced and should be compensated accordingly.

But since then, we have been steadily fed the message that actually those who contribute capital and investment or have ownership are the most important part of production and that they should realize the greater part of the profits.

Now, of course, it is not one or the other. Many enterprises could not exist or grow without investors. They should expect a return. But it is a question of balance, and we have seen that balance shift away from labour and toward capital in terms of who deserves to get more.

Questions We Need to Consider

With all that going on, Jesus' parable seems to raise the kinds of questions we need to be thinking about today. How much is labour worth? How much should the vineyard owner be able to profit from the labour of the workers?

And Jesus throws an interesting twist into the story. The workers do everything right. As often happens, the people on the shop floor are the ones who have a real sense of how the work needs to get done.

It is the owner who makes a huge mistake in Jesus' parable. He wants to save money and doesn't hire enough people to get the work done before the grapes go bad. He has to race desperately back to the market several times to hire more workers and ends up paying more workers for the full day than he should have had to.

He Thinks He's Good

And the owner in Jesus' parable also doesn't even see what a bad manager he is. This is often masked in our translations. When the owner tries to explain why he had to spend so much on his workers, he says (in our translations), **“Or are you envious because I am generous?”**

But that is not what it says in the original Greek. It actually says, **“is your eye evil because I am good?”** That is right; he is actually boasting that he is so good at his job that everyone is jealous of him.

That makes no sense when you realize that he has actually completely botched the entire harvest operation, and so perhaps that is why translators offer the other translation.

But though it doesn't make any sense, doesn't what he says remind you of so many executives who totally destroy the profitability of the companies that they are running? They run the place into the ground, everyone gets laid off and yet somehow, they end up getting a nice big bonus, a golden parachute and are soon put in charge of another company. No wonder they think they are so good at their jobs! The boast, **“is your eye evil because I am good?”** really does seem like the kind of thing that they would say.

Continually Fresh Interpretations

So, the parable can and absolutely should be applied to the various struggles we deal with in our society around labour, profit and enterprise. I have preached on this parable myself many times before and made that very point.

Every time I come back to it, I see something new – not because the parable has changed but because our society has changed. These days it is the coming of Artificial Intelligence that is eroding the power of the workers and emboldening the wealthiest, but that is just another weapon in a war that has been raging for a long time.

Your Application

This is the point in the sermon where I usually tell you what to do with all of this. I like, whenever possible, to give you a nice and well-defined action that you can take with you and live out the Gospel in the coming week.

But Jesus didn't usually tell parables to get people to take specific actions. He told them to challenge people to change the way that they thought. He wanted to give people new perspectives on God and on the world.

Let the Story Challenge Your Perspective

So, I'm not going to give you a specific action or even a specific interpretation of this passage today. What I want you to do with it is what I think Jesus intended you to do. Take the story with you. Chew on it over this coming week.

Put yourself in the position of the worker. You are forced to sit in the marketplace and hope that someone might hire you for the day and even pay you enough to live. But you know that you are ultimately at the owner's mercy.

Put yourself in the position of the owner who discovered late in the day that he actually did need the labour of the workers more than he thought and that they were actually worth their pay.

But most of all, let this story of Jesus challenge the comfortable assumptions you make every day about who really contributes to society and who doesn't, who takes and who gives, who deserves a return for what they have put in and who doesn't.

Jesus told these parables for exactly that reason. When people listened to these stories and let them challenge the assumptions that they carried with them, that was when they discovered the true nature of the kingdom of God.