

Group Study – The Workers in the Field

In this week's study, pastor Natalie Webb invites us to reconsider some of our previously held interpretations of the parable Jesus told about the workers in the field.

1. If you have ever read, been taught, or thought about the parable in Matthew 20:1-16, what interpretations have you come away with from the story?
2. If you could place yourself in the story, which character do you think you would be?
3. A question the Maxwells invite us to ask in their studies is, "Why would the narrator tell *this* story in *this* way." In thinking about this parable, why do you think Jesus would tell the story the way he did? Why might Matthew include it in his gospel?
4. If you could ask Jesus one question about this story, what would it be?

—

Good Faith Bible Study Podcast Transcript

Good Faith Bible Study

Guest: Craig Nash

March 30, 2025

"The Workers in the Field"

Matthew 20:1-16

<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies/>

If you have been following along with these Bible study podcasts, you'll notice my voice is neither that of Kathy nor Nathan Maxwell, but of Craig Nash, senior editor at Good Faith Media and the editor of *Good Faith Magazine*. For the last week of each quarter of Good Faith Bible Studies, the Maxwells will be handing the reins over to a guest writer. This will be a good palette cleanser, allowing your groups to step back from the trajectory of the Maxwells' studies before the next quarter shifts its thematic focus.

This is also an excellent time for me to say "thank you" to the Maxwells and to the classes, small groups and study leaders who have been following along with their Bible studies since the beginning of the year. I want to extend a special thanks to those groups

who have been part of the Good Faith community for many years through Tony Cartledge's Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, and who have continued along with us on this new journey of *Good Faith Magazine* and Bible Studies. Change always involves a bit of a learning curve and some stretching on everyone's part—from your groups, to our curriculum writers, to the Good Faith Media Team. I'm grateful for the grace you've all extended in these early days of this new venture.

Today's Bible study comes to us from the Rev. Natalie Webb, who is the pastor of University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas. It focuses on a parable Jesus told about a landowner who went out looking for workers and offered the ones he found a certain wage for a day's work. He found some workers at nine in the morning, others at noon in the afternoon, some more at three, and then some final workers just before the sun went down. At the end of the day, the landowner paid all the workers the same wage, which, as you might expect, angered the workers who began their day in the field at nine in the morning. Jesus tells them they shouldn't be angry because he paid them what he told them what he would pay them. And then he ended the story with some of the most famous and, to some, frustrating words from Jesus: "The last will be first, and the first will be last."

In her study for today, Rev. Webb points to the way many of us have been taught to receive this parable: that whatever grace we receive from God is more than any of us deserve. And she suggests that this interpretation of the parable misses the point: that it could be that what Jesus is really communicating is that each of our worth lies in something beyond our ability to contribute, whether that be to the economy, to our families, to our churches or to any system that we have been taught to value.

In thinking about how to lead a class through this study, there's an interesting angle you could take that flips a question the Maxwells often ask in their studies upside down. Their question "Why tell this story this way?" could just as easily be, "Why have we received this story the way we have often received it?" In other words, why has the dominant interpretation of the story been "We all get more than we deserve" and not "We are all valuable for reasons beyond what we can contribute"?

Another angle would be to talk about this famous aphorism of Jesus, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last," and all the other places it appears in the teachings of Jesus. In Matthew 19, the chapter before this story appears, after some difficult

teachings about selling possessions and leaving families and fields for the sake of Jesus, Jesus says: “Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” It appears in a similar telling of the “rich young ruler” story in Mark chapter 10. In Luke 13, Jesus tells his listeners to enter through the narrow door. And then he says that some who think they know him will not receive entrance into his kingdom, and others who come from elsewhere will. He ends that teaching also with, “Indeed, there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”

What do these passages have in common? Where do they differ? Ask the folks in your group how some of the principles of interpretation the Maxwells have written about can apply to this passage. Finally, have them reflect on the goodness of God who loves us all, despite our abilities, our giftings, our personalities or our contributions.