



September 20, 2026 | **Appraising Success** | Pastor Eddie Eddy

Matthew 20:1-16 Workers in the vineyard **20** *"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard. ³ "About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵ So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷ "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸ "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹ "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' ¹³ "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

L: This is the word of God for the people of God: P: Thanks be to God.

Appraising Success Matthew 20:1–16

When I was serving churches in Illinois, I also had the opportunity to serve on a bunch of different committees at both the district and conference level. There were two in particular that I really enjoyed.

One was the Exploration Team. That team was created in 2019 to help write a new expression of faith for the Northern Illinois Conference following the passage of the Traditional Plan earlier that year. I was definitely in the minority on that committee as someone who held traditional convictions concerning human sexuality. But I have to tell you, it was a fulfilling experience. I worked closely with people whose convictions were sometimes the polar opposite of mine, and yet we shared a common desire to see people come to know Jesus.

The second one I really enjoyed was the Vitality Team. It was a task force created by the conference to take a serious look at the health and vitality of our churches. Our team was given the challenge of developing a tool that could help measure what a vital church actually looks like.

And I learned a lot serving in that capacity. I picked up some valuable nuggets of information that have stayed with me and continue to shape the way I look at the church and its mission today.

But the driving question behind everything we did was really a pretty simple one...that turned out not to be so simple to answer:

How do you measure success in the church?

What are the metrics we should use when we are **"Appraising Success"**?

That question fits pretty well with our parable this morning.

Matthew tells us about a landowner who goes out early in the morning and hires workers for his vineyard. He goes back at nine and hires some more. He goes back at noon...then three...and finally, at five o'clock, when the workday is almost over, he hires a few more.

Then comes payday.

And this is where the story gets interesting.

The landowner pays every one of them the same wage...regardless of how many hours they worked.

Now, I think for most of us who spent our careers busting our humps every day, something about that just doesn't seem fair.

You mean to tell me I showed up first thing this morning, worked through the heat of the day, put in all those hours...and that guy who showed up an hour before quitting time gets the same paycheck I do?

Come on!

That's not how the world works.

We live in a culture that tells us success comes from working more, producing more, developing more skills, making more money and becoming more valuable to the employer.

More work...more reward.

More education...more opportunity.

More accomplishments...more success.

Those are the metrics we have learned to use.

But Jesus tells this story because **God doesn't appraise success using the same metrics we do.**

And that raises an even bigger question.

How do we measure the value of a human life?

Can somebody's worth really be determined by how much money they make? How much education they have? What kind of house they live in? What they own? How productive they are?

Or is there another way to measure value?

Jesus is challenging us to stop measuring ourselves—and everybody else—by the rewards we receive for the talents we possess.

He is inviting us to see ourselves through **God's metric instead of the world's.**

PAUSE

Let me give you an example.

There have been a lot of studies over the years looking at the value of preschool education. Those studies helped convince states and communities to provide greater access to preschool because children who attend preschool often enter kindergarten better prepared socially, emotionally and academically.

But here is where it gets interesting.

Some research has suggested that the early advantage in things like language and math can begin to level out after a few years.

So if we were trying to appraise the success of preschool using only academic test scores, we might ask:

Was preschool really that successful?

Well...that depends entirely on what you are measuring.

If our only metric is how well a child reads, writes or does math a few years later, we might decide preschool wasn't as valuable as we thought.

But if we broaden the metric and start looking at social development, emotional development, relationships, confidence and all those other skills children begin learning at a young age...suddenly the picture changes.

I have to admit that when I was a young father—and, like most young fathers, thought I knew everything—I wasn't convinced preschool was necessary.

Fortunately, Jeanie overruled me. She thought our oldest son should go to preschool. And in her wisdom...she won that argument.

And truthfully...that wasn't the last one she won either.

But here is the thing...at that point in my life, I was measuring the value differently. I was looking at the cost and asking whether the academic benefit justified it.

Jeanie was looking at something bigger.

And today, I thank God that she overruled me...because I can look back and recognize that some of the things our son gained from that experience...couldn't be measured on a standard report card.

I was using the wrong metric.

And that's really the point of this passage...what we call **success** depends heavily on what we decide to measure. Which brings us right back to Jesus and these workers in the vineyard.

The workers...were measuring success using two things:

Time and money.

Hours worked. Money received. More hours should equal more money. In this world...that makes perfect sense to us.

But then the landowner changes the metric.

The people who worked half a day receive the same wage.

The people who worked only a few hours receive the same wage.

And then the guys who showed up at five o'clock receive the same wage as the ones who had been sweating in the vineyard since sunrise.

And the early birds are ticked!

But notice something in the story.

The first workers knew exactly what they were going to receive. The landowner agreed to pay them a denarius, and that is exactly what he paid them. The workers hired later were simply told:

"I'll pay you whatever is right."

And the last group wasn't even promised a specific wage. They were just told: **Go into the vineyard.**

Think about that.

They went to work trusting the landowner. They didn't know what they would receive. They simply trusted that he would do what was right. And when evening came, the landowner wasn't measuring their worth by the number of hours they had worked. He was measuring according to **his generosity**.

PAUSE

Friends, that is where this parable starts stepping on our toes.

Because we spend an awful lot of our lives measuring success by what we receive for what we have done. But Jesus changes the metric. Instead of measuring success by what **we earn**, what if we measured it by what **God gives**?

And maybe we need to go even further.

What if this parable isn't really about **our success at all**? What if it is about the success of the **Kingdom of God**? Then how would we measure that? Maybe the measure of Kingdom success is how many people are willing to receive the wage of **grace**.

What if the wage in this story represents something none of us could ever earn in the first place?

God's grace. God's mercy. God's forgiveness. God's love.

What if the success of the Kingdom is measured by how many people receive that gift? Because if that becomes our metric...then suddenly I don't have to worry about whether somebody else got more than I did.

I don't have to worry about whether somebody deserves to stand beside me.

I don't have to compare how long I have been a Christian with how long they have been one.

I don't have to say, "I've been in this church for fifty years and they just got here."

I don't have to say, "I've served on committees...worked at the food pantry...visited the shut-ins...taught Sunday school...given money...cleaned the church...and now you're telling me...that person gets the same grace I do?"

Yep. That is exactly what Jesus is telling us.

And thank God He is. Because none of us earned our way into the vineyard in the first place.

PAUSE

Scripture tells us that God's grace is sufficient. Grace is what makes us whole.

So if God's grace is enough to make **you** whole, why would you be upset when that same grace...makes somebody else whole?

This is where I think we discover the real measure of spiritual success.

It isn't simply being grateful that **I** received grace. It is being genuinely grateful when I see **you** receive it too.

Even when you came later. Even when your story is different from mine. Even when you haven't served as long as I have. Even when I don't think **you** deserve it. Because the uncomfortable truth behind grace is this:

Neither do I.

That is why we cannot measure spiritual success by wealth, education, status, accomplishments, race, background, denomination, years of membership or any other human measurement we come up with.

The metric of the Kingdom is grace.

Grace received. Grace lived. And grace shared.

And if we really want to talk about the vitality of a church, maybe that ought to be one of our measurements too.

Not simply:

How many people were here? How much money came in? How many programs did we run? How many meetings did we have? Those things can tell us something.

But maybe the better questions are:

How many people encountered Jesus?

How many people experienced grace?

How many people found forgiveness?

How many people discovered that there was a place for them in the vineyard?

And maybe most challenging of all:

Did those of us who were already in the vineyard rejoice when they showed up?

Because Jesus ends this parable by turning our whole system of measurement upside down. “The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

In the Kingdom of God, those of us who hear the call to pick up our cross and join the work of the vineyard stand together as people completely dependent upon the generosity of the landowner.

The question is:

Are we okay with that?

Are we okay with somebody who comes to Jesus at the eleventh hour receiving the same grace we have depended upon our entire lives?

Are we okay with someone walking through these doors carrying a past we don't understand and discovering that Jesus loves them just as much as He loves us?

Are we willing to celebrate when somebody we might have counted out discovers that there is still a place for them in the vineyard?

Because if I am appraising my success by how much more I have than you...how much longer I have served than you...how much more I know than you...or how much more deserving I think I am than you...

then I am using the wrong metric.

The landowner says:

“Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I'm generous?”

Church, that might be the question Jesus leaves hanging in the air for us today.

Can we rejoice in the generosity of God...even when His generosity is being poured out on somebody else?

Because maybe the greatest sign of a successful Christian life isn't simply that I have received grace.

Maybe it is that I have received so much grace that I desperately want everyone else to experience it too.

So this week, when you start measuring your life...your church...your accomplishments...or even the people around you...

remember to ask yourself one question: **Whose metric am I using?**

Because the world will always tell us to measure success by what we have earned. Jesus tells us to measure it by the grace God has given.

How are you appraising success?

To God be the glory. Amen.

Invitation to the offering

Friends, we have just been reminded that the Kingdom of God doesn't measure success the way the world does. God has given us grace that we could never earn, mercy that we could never purchase, and love that we could never repay.

So our offering this morning isn't about paying God back. We couldn't do that if we tried. Our giving is simply one way we respond to the generosity we have already received. We give so that the work of the vineyard can continue...so that more people can encounter Jesus, experience grace, and discover that there is a place for them in God's Kingdom.

Let us give today with grateful and generous hearts.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, we thank You that Your grace is not something we have to earn and Your love is not something we have to compete for. You have welcomed us into Your vineyard, called us to Your work, and given us far more than we could ever deserve.

Forgive us for the times we have measured ourselves and others by the standards of this world. Forgive us when we have compared, competed, or believed that somehow we deserve more because we have worked longer or done more. Teach us instead to rejoice in Your generosity and to celebrate every person who discovers the grace we have received.

Lord, we dedicate these gifts to You today. Take what we have offered and use it to strengthen Your church, serve our communities, reach those who are still standing outside the vineyard, and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

And as we leave this place, we dedicate ourselves as well. Send us back into Your vineyard ready to work, ready to serve, and ready to welcome whoever You call next.

May our success never be measured simply by what we accomplish, but by how faithfully we love, how freely we share Your grace, and how boldly we point others toward Jesus.

We pray all of this in His holy name.

Amen.