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The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Matthew 19:27-20:16, "Then Peter said in reply, "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

20 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵ So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them,

'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first last.

According to 1 Samuel 16 man does not see as God sees.

1 Samuel 16:7, "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'"

Years ago a preacher was speaking at a large conference with hundreds of people in attendance. During the first session he noticed a man sleeping on the front row. At first it didn't bother him. But when he saw this same gentleman at the second, third, and fourth sessions sleeping in the very same seat on the front row, he began to get a little frustrated. He thought, *"What? Is this man trying tell me that I'm boring? Why not just tell me? Why does he have to be so rude about it?"*

By the end of the conference, the preacher had become quite irritated by this elderly man- because he'd seen his kind before. Rather than privately expressing his dislike for this speaker, this older man made a public spectacle for all to see, essentially saying, "The preacher is a bore!" So when on the last day of the conference this elderly man and his wife approached this preacher, Chuck Swindol, tensed, readying himself for a battle. And yet, he didn't get a battle. Rather, she explained: "Thank you so much for your ministry. My husband and I are great supporters of you. In fact, my husband loves you so much that even though he's on chemotherapy, he still insisted on being here today. I hope his sleeping didn't bother you."

Man doesn't see as God sees that was the lesson that Samuel learned over 3000 years ago. And this is the lesson that the people of God needed to learn during the days of Christ.

See, just as today, the tendency in the church in Christ's day was to relate to each other based on outward appearance. If you were Jewish, male, circumcised, of a prominent family, wealthy, or one of the disciples, then the kingdom of God was yours; God owed you! But if you were none of these, you were considered a second class citizen, and treated rather shamefully (James 2:1; Galatians 2:6; Acts 6:1). And that is why when Christ shared with His disciples the glorious news of "...everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29) He qualified it with "But many who are first will be last; and the last, first" (Matthew 19:30).

The meaning of this phrase "the first will be last and the last first" is not all that obvious. Who are the

“first” of this text? Who are the “last?” And in what way do the “last” become “first”? Christ told this parable to answer these questions.

Matthew 20:1-2, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.”

This would have been a typical scene in the days of the Bible. As we have employment agencies today, in the first century A.D. Palestine there were places where the common man gathered who sought work. These laborers were men who were unskilled at a trade. As such, they were near the bottom of the social-economic scale. In fact, many of them were not far above beggars. They worked from job to job, many of which lasted no more than a day, and often less.

The Socio-Status Scale in Judaism looked something like this:

1. High Priest
2. Religious Parties
3. Priests
4. Scribes
5. Lawyers
6. Land Owners
7. Merchants
8. Farmers
9. Craftsmen
10. Slaves
11. Laborers
12. Beggars

Because they had no guarantee of work beyond what they might be doing at the time, they would gather in the market place before dawn to be available for hiring. And that is where the landowner of this parable found these men. Now the kind of labor that was sought after here was the work associated with a vineyard.

Christ does not state the nature of the work in the vineyard, but it is not very much of a stretch to know that this was hard work. New vineyards were most often planted on terraced hillsides, most of which were stony. The stones were removed to build the retaining walls for the land above. Once these terraces were completed they were filled with new topsoil which was carried up the hill from the fertile soil below. Then the land was readied for the grape vines.

Now every year the vines were pruned to improve production. Then there is the weeding and the mowing and the harvesting. Harvesting is labor intensive and is a frantic and demanding time.

Now, because most owners did not have enough household servants or regular slaves to do these seasonal jobs, temporary “day laborers” were hired from nearby towns and villages. And this brings us to the parable and promised pay, the denarius. This was the wage of a Roman soldier (cf. Tobit 5:14; Tacitus *Annales*, 1.17; Pliny 33.3) which doesn’t mean a whole lot to us, but meant a great deal to those

listening. See while soldiering for Rome wasn't the most glorious or prestigious job, it nevertheless was higher up the social ladder than the common, Jewish laborer of Palestine. As such, the promise of a denarius to these day laborers would have been understood to be quite generous, and so they "agree" and that undoubtedly with great eagerness!

Now, this particular landowner's property obviously was large, and so he needed more laborers to get the job done. Thus we read this:

Matthew 20:3-7, "And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, 'You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day long?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You too go into the vineyard.'"

Once again, this would have been a description of a very common scene in Christ's day, the hiring of workers. Now notice a couple of the phrases here:

Matthew 20:3, "...and saw others standing idle..."

This does not denote laziness, just unemployment. Perhaps these laborers hadn't been hired for work yet, or perhaps they had just finished a previous job the text doesn't say.

Matthew 20:4, "...whatever is right I will give you."

As in all rural communities, everyone knew everyone else, and these workers no doubt trusted the owner as a man of his word. As such, while the owner does not promise a particular wage, no doubt these workers knew it would be fair.

Matthew 20:3, 5, 6, "...third hour... sixth hour... eleventh hour..."

The Jewish work day began at 6:00 a.m., which was called the first hour. As such, the third hour began at 9:00 a.m., the sixth hour began at 12:00 noon, the ninth hour began at 3:00 p.m., and the eleventh hour began at 5:00 p.m. Now brothers and sisters, it is at this point that this parable begins to get a little peculiar. By the eleventh hour (5:00 p.m.), most work on most plantations would have been winding down. As such, most laborers waiting for work at this time would have begun losing hope that they would work that day. And yet, in this particular town it was different because of the generosity of the landowner. Hendriksen explains:

What a gracious man this estate-owner is. It is clear that he is interested not only in his vineyard but also in the unemployed. He hires them when they, and everyone else, must have thought that for such men as these all hope of working in the vineyard on that day was baseless. (Hendriksen 2002, 737)

And so we are dealing with the story of a landowner hiring workers for his vineyard, and because he is gracious, he hires some a little later than would be expected. This is a rather typical story to this point.

And yet, here the parable takes a twist.

The Reckoning

Matthew 20:8, “And when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’”

Because there were many unskilled laborers in the ancient Near East with little chance for steady income, many were desperate for work, and therefore vulnerable. Because of the poor man’s economic status, it wouldn’t be very hard to take advantage of them and not pay them for weeks and even months on end (and maybe never). As such as far back as Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:15, God commanded His people to have compassion on these men. Israel was to pay their laborers at the end of each day! And that is what every conscientious Jewish employer did in obedience to Old Testament law. And yet, the typical mode of payment even back then was “first come first served.” Here we see a peculiarity. Notice that it was “last come first served.” The text continues:

Matthew 20:9-10, “And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius.”

Though Christ does not say it, the implication is clear; ALL the workers up to those hired first were paid a denarius.

Now as human nature would have it, we can imagine how the laborers who worked all day felt as they heard and saw those who worked far less than they and yet got paid 1 denarius. The natural thought would have been: *“If the owner gave one denarius for working one hour, we who have worked twelve stand to gain a bundle!”* And yet, their hopes were dashed; they too received one denarius.

The Complaint

Matthew 20:11-12, “And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, ‘These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.’”

As we have said, working in a vineyard was hard work. It involved laboring on a hillside in the heat of the day with few breaks! As such, we can sympathize with these people’s complaint of, “It’s not fair!” Now the picture that is conveyed here is that these labor’s joy turned to anger as they realized that they received the same pay as some who had worked for only one hour. As such, they were determined not to leave until they received “satisfaction” from the landowner.

However, we also get a glimpse into the real problem. Notice Matthew 20:12 again. It does not say: “You have made us equal to the late-comers” (which would have been a complaint about the money), BUT “You have made them equal to us” (which is a complaint about their status; *“we are more important!”*). In other words, not only were they dissatisfied with what they themselves had received, but more fundamentally, they were envious of how the others were treated! See, they thought that they

deserved more. They thought they were *better*, and thus *more worthy* than the others. When it came to importance, THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN FIRST!

And yet, they were last, not only in the order of receiving compensation, but more fundamentally in the *perceived* value placed on them! That was their main problem. They who should have been first [not just in order, but in their status], were made to be last!

Response

Matthew 20:13-15, "But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?'"

The refutation of the landowner is complete and crushing. All that is left to do for the laborers is take their denarius and go home. And yet, notice the particulars:

Matthew 20:13, "...friend..."

Hetairos, this is not the term for a close friend, but rather a casual companion. That the landowner only addresses one person implies that this "friend" probably was the spokesman of the group.

Matthew 20:13, "...I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius."

Truly, these men were out of line. Before 6:00 a.m. this morning, they had "agreed" with the owner on a price for their labor (cf. v. 2). And as mentioned earlier, a denarius was a fair, yea even a generous, wage for their labor. At the time they would have been thrilled! And so there is no injustice here, both had lived up to their end of the bargain!

Matthew 20:15, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own..."

What the landowner paid other laborers or what the landowner did with his own money, was in no way the business of the laborers. In fact, if the landowner wanted to give half of his wealth to one of these laborers, he would not be unjust and we would admire him for his generosity.

Matthew 20:15b, "...or is your eye envious because I am generous."

With this we see again the root of the problem. It is NOT the landowner, BUT the laborer's sin that needs to be addressed. Rather than rejoicing at the blessing of the other laborers, these workers became envious and bitter!

Matthew 20:16, "Thus the last shall be first, and the first last."

With this, Christ brings the parable to its appropriate end and application. In the Kingdom of God, our perceived position makes no difference, "God shows no partiality" (Galatians 2:6)! In fact, it is just the

opposite to what we naturally think when it comes to the kingdom of God.

Matthew 20:25-27, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave...”

Don't miss a very important point. When it comes to the kingdom of God, the “first” are NOT those in powerful positions (the wealthy, governor, or king), BUT those who on account of their deeds think they are better/more important than others. And the “last” are NOT those with nothing, BUT those who recognize they are nothing without God's grace, which is why:

- On Judgment Day, “The first will be last and the last will be first!”
- In the Kingdom of God, “The first are last and the last are first!”

With this we are brought to the point of this parable and the question, “What is Christ teaching through this story?” The answer is obvious. To a group of disciples promised so much by way of reward when it comes to the kingdom of God, they must realize that these benefits do not make them any better or more important than anyone else in the kingdom.¹ In fact, when it comes to the things that this world values and in which we are inclined to boast, “The last shall indeed be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16).

How do we apply a text like this? Do we simply accept the fact that others may be saved later than us? Do less work than us? Suffer less than us? Yet, still receive the same salvation? We can handle that, yet that is a rather shallow application of this passage!

To answer this question it is important to recall again the “problem” in this text. It is not the injustice of a mean and cruel landowner but the mercy of a gracious and loving farmer.

Matthew 20:15b, “...Is your eye envious because I am generous?”

One of the most self-harming/self-abusing sins that we can commit as God's children is the taking of God's grace for granted! By right we deserve nothing less than death (Romans 6:23), but by grace we have received life (Ephesians 2:8-9). Now rather than living in light of this grace- accepting as a gift from the Lord for our benefit and good.

- The providences of God — be they sweet or bitter.
- The provisions of God — be they plentiful or sparse.
- The love of God — regardless of the form it takes.

We take God's grace for granted and live according to the world's standard which says: “*He who is most blessed is most deserving.*”

That is a lie and the very thing Christ was addressing in this parable! What you get in this life does not determine how God values you! It is your relationship with Christ that is the basis of the valuation! If you are saved, you know Christ loves you. If you are not, you have no basis for any confidence!

Accordingly we must avoid two errors. The first error is that of taking God's grace for granted.

Recall, R. C. Sproul's account of one of his classes. In one of his classes, at the beginning of his teaching career, he assigned three papers. On the due date of the first assigned paper, approximately ninety percent of the class had turned in their paper. At the end of class, a group of students gathered around him begging for an extension, which was granted. On the due date of the second paper eighty percent of the class had turned in their paper. But this time at the end of class, a larger group of students gathered around him begging for an extension, which also was granted.

On the due date of the third and final paper seventy percent of the class had turned in their paper and Dr. Sproul was upset. This time he asked *during class* where the other papers were. The thirty percent who were late very casually said that they would get it to him and that he shouldn't worry about it, to which Dr. Sproul publicly said that all late papers would get a zero. It was when one student who was late called out, "That's not fair!"

Dr. Sproul responded to this student who also had been late on his previous paper, "You want fairness? O.K. 'F' on this paper and 'F' on your previous paper. That's fair!" Dr. R. C. Sproul's point in telling this story was to illustrate the sinfulness of our hearts and how we tend to take grace for granted and so expect grace, JUST LIKE THE WORKERS OF THIS PARABLE. Dr. John MacArthur put it this way when he wrote this:

The charge of unfairness was not grounded in a love for justice but in the selfish assumption that the extra pay they *wanted* was pay they *deserved*. (Dr. John F. MacArthur 1988, 212-213)

The second error we make is the cultivation of the work for wages mentality toward God. Listen to the words of C. H. Spurgeon:

And alas! even Christians have fallen into the same error. They have been apt to think, that if God lifts a man up there must be some excellence in him; and if he chastens and afflicts, they are generally led to think that it must be an exhibition of wrath...
The fact is, that this world is not the place of punishment. There may now and then be eminent judgments; but as a rule God does not in the present state fully punish any man for sin. He allows the wicked to go on in their wickedness; he throws the reins upon their necks; he lets them go on unbridled in their lusts; some checks of conscience there may be; but these are rather, as monitions than as punishments. And, on the other hand, he casts the Christian down; he gives the most afflictions to the most pious; perhaps he makes more waves of trouble roll over the breast of the most sanctified Christian than over the heart of any other man living. So, then, we must remember that as this world is not the place of punishment, we are to expect punishment and reward in the world to come; and we must believe that the only reason, then, why God afflicts his people must be this: 'In love I correct thee, thy gold to refine, to make thee at length in my likeness to shine.' (Spurgeon November 22, 1857)

Ah, but taking the false notion that "God helps those who help themselves! God rewards those who are worthy!" we get tripped up when bitter providences come our way! In the Kingdom of God, there is no such thing as merit! God's grace is granted according to His good pleasure. What I have and what I am going to receive in Christ are distributed according to the kind intention of God's will! And thus if another is more blessed or used by God in a manner judged by others to be more glorious or if another is suffering

greatly or struggling on account of this state of sin and misery rather than charging God with unfairness, we as believers are to:

- Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).
- Glory that the cross is being preached (Philippians 1:18).
- Bear the burdens of another without grumbling or complaining (Galatians 6:1).

Let us be done with the unhealthy “work-for-wages” mentality by which we relate to God based on our effort. In fact consider the contrast between the two workers:

- Those who trusted the character of the land owner- they didn’t barter or haggle. What did they look like when they were paid? Those who bartered with the land owner, “If you do this, I’ll do that.” What did they look like when they were paid?

You will find that those who wager with God in life always will be disappointed! But those who trust God, their life is a doxology! May God give us the grace to be done with the work-for-wages mentality!

End Notes

¹ This doesn’t contradict the truth that in heaven there will be different rewards (cf. Mt. 16:27; 1 Cor. 3:8, 13-15). Rather, we learn from this that heaven itself is the sinner’s unconditional reward based not on the merits of man, but the pleasure of God! The lesson in this parable is not the differences of rewards but the equality of salvation.

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About the Preacher

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