

The Parables of Jesus

The Parable of the Eccentric Landowner

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This parable, in Matthew 20 verses 1-16, is known as the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. But it is really, first and foremost about the landowner, which is why I have changed the traditional title. Here we have a landowner who seems to be a fountainhead of economic nonsense. I mean, if you ever ran your business this way... If you hired and paid your employees in this fashion you would soon be out of business. Not to mention the fact that you would be facing a class action lawsuit for unjust compensation practices. But, of course, it is precisely the scandal of how the landowner behaves, his eccentricity, which is being used to provoke us into serious reflection on the nature of the kingdom.

Now this parable is, by all accounts, one of the more difficult parables to interpret. I do think the broader context helps to guide us. Just prior to our text, in Matthew 19, Jesus has confronted the rich young man who then refused to give up his wealth and enter the kingdom of God. Jesus tells the disciples that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom; in fact it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The disciples, greatly astonished, ask 'who then can be saved?' To which Jesus replies: with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Then Peter, true to form, wants to cash this out for his own situation. He asks (chapter 19): See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have? The last part is important: what then will we have?

Peter wants to know what he is going to get for his – and the other disciples – sacrifices for the kingdom. As we saw last week, Peter is a counter. What are WE going to get? Jesus' answer is - you will get plenty. In the new world he says, starting in 19:28, you will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Everyone who has left houses or family or lands for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. Then we come to the crucial verse, 19:30. But, many who are first will be last and the last first. Notice that this is the same text, only with the order reversed, that Jesus uses at the end of our parable in 20:16: So the last will be first and the first last.

So this idea: the first will be last and the last first, brackets our parable and the parable is told to illustrate what Jesus means by this somewhat enigmatic statement. In some contexts, the first will be last and the last first, is quite simple to understand. Here it will turn out to be less obvious. Here the phrase is being used to expose the attitude of the disciple's hearts. The point to Peter and the

disciples will be: you have your reward, but the way I will judge will not be according to human reckoning or calculation. Human standards of fairness will not restrict my sovereign, gracious freedom.

So, with that introduction, let's look at the parable itself. We shall make four points: the hiring process, the pay, the response, and the conclusion.

I. The Hiring Process

First, the hiring process: In v.1 we are told: the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner (master of the house) – so right away we see the focus of the parable is the employer not the employees. He goes out early in the morning, probably at the break of dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. He is apparently harvesting grapes and wants the job done in a single day.

This is not unreasonable since the sugar content of high vintage grapes can be very time-sensitive. So, he agrees with this first set of workers for the standard, subsistence wage for a day laborer: one denarius. Other benefits have not yet been made mandatory in Palestine. He sends them into the vineyard. This would be around 6AM. The workday ran from 6 to 6 and, with time for breaks and prayers, would be about a ten hour day.

In vv. 3-5 the owner goes out in the third, sixth and ninth hours, and hires more workers. This would be about 9am, Noon and 3PM, respectively. There is no agreed upon wage for these workers, just, as it says at the end of v.4: whatever is right I will give you.

Now, I do not believe we can really conclude much about the WORKERS from the fact that there was an agreed price for the first set and no agreed price for the others. All it does is function to enable our surprise later when the pay is actually distributed.

Now this behavior of the landowner is strange as well. He either can't figure out how many man hours he needs for one days work, or he is a compassionate man and wants to hire as many poor day laborers as he possibly can, or he's responding to real-time demands in his harvest – or some combination.

But again, one cannot deduce HR lessons from the text. The erratic hiring practice serves as color to set up the conclusion. In fact, you'll notice that those hired in the third, sixth and ninth hours are not even mentioned in the conclusion. They are extras in the play.

So, in v.6 the owner goes out yet again in the 11th hour (about 5PM) to hire his fifth and final batch of workers. He asks them: why do you stand here all day? Some translations add the words "doing nothing", but nothing negative or

pejorative is implied here. In v.7 they say: because no one has hired us. It's not that they haven't been looking and the fact that they are still looking at 5PM speaks well of them – and it might imply something about the desperation of their economic condition. So the landowner sends them into the vineyard as well.

II. The Pay

Our second point is the pay. Then, in v.8, when evening had come, in accordance with the Law, which in Lev 19 and Dt 24 forbids withholding wages overnight, he has the foreman call the laborers and pay them.

Now, and I don't mean to keep repeating myself, but no significance should be read into the delegation of this task to the foreman. One principle that enables us to say – not with perfect confidence – but with a high degree of confidence, who or what has significance, is what scholars call “end-stress” in the parables. That is, the stuff toward the end, the climax of the story, is the weighty stuff – and even where there is not an explicit interpretation, it is often implied in the material toward or at the end. And here, in the later part of the text the foreman disappears and the owner takes over and directs the scene.

In any event, the foreman is to hand out the wages, we see in v.8, starting with the last hired, up to the first hired. This does two things. First, it echoes the conclusion of the parable: the last will be first and the first last, though the conclusion is about more than the simple ordering of rewards. Second, and more practically, it allows those hired first to see what those hired last got paid. If the owner did it the other way around the first could receive their pay, go home, and never be outraged by the owners pay policy.

Verse 9 tells us that when those hired in the 11th hour come they receive a denarius – a full days pay for one hours work. Outside of certain union contracts, I don't know how else you can pull this off.

My uncle was the head of the longshoreman's union for the port of Miami. If any shipping company in the world wanted to get goods into Miami they had to negotiate with him, his lawyers, and his bodyguards. And since they had a monopoly on unloading ships in the port, the shipping companies always caved. One perk the union got for their dockworkers was triple time for one hour of work on Sundays – 3 days pay for one hours work. Imagine three backbreaking days of labor on the docks: say, Thursday, Friday and Saturday – and you get the same pay as these guys get in one hour on Sunday – because you're not under that cushy contract provision.

Now we can begin to grasp the emotion of laborers in v.10, faithful and exhausted, hired sometime before or around 6 am, they had agreed to a denarius, but now they thought -reasonably- they would receive more. But, as the

end of v.10 says: each of them also received a denarius. And here the reaction is remarkably like that of the older son in the parable of the prodigal son. And we can understand why they react so fiercely: the owners' policy strikes deep at the root of our sense of fairness and justice. This is a parable where we all identify with, if you will, "the bad guys." And when it's over we're often still not sure why the first workers don't have a beef. And they grumbled against the landowner, and, in v.12, they say: 'these men who were hired last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

Notice the phrase you have made THEM equal to US. This is envy. Jealousy wants what someone else has. Envy is more vicious. It just doesn't want the other person to have what they have. In this case because it makes them EQUAL to us. It's not that those hired first want the pay of those hired last – they just don't want them to have the same pay as they have.

III. The Response

Our third point is the owner's response. In v.13, finally, the owner, who does clearly stand in for God, speaks to one of the ones hired first – probably the ringleader. And he says: Friend – which here means this rebuke is but a mild one – friend, I am not being unfair to you. Did you not agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.

The owner neither explains the economic rationale nor attempts to justify the scandal. But he does strike clearly the note of his sovereign freedom in the situation. I want to (I CHOOSE) to give to the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. And then, echoing the language of the potter and the clay, he says: Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?

The point of this parable is both simple and hard. Simply put, it is that God can do whatever He likes with what is His. It's hard because the story scandalizes, and we are left trying to figure out how it all fits together. But the owners point is plain. I am never unjust or unfair, but I am the Lord, I am free and my grace transcends all YOUR notions of justice and fairness and merit. The kingdom is not a meritocracy. It is not a reflection of corporate America. My economy is my own. My generosity will not be domesticated. My calculus is a strange calculus.

We see the note of Divine freedom of generosity at the end of v.15: another gentle rebuke to the first-hired: or are you envious because I am generous? (envy in heart of disciples – I don't want them to have what I don't think they've earned)

Now I doubt this explanation would satisfy any of us if we were the first hired. But that is precisely the point. God is saying: I know this doesn't satisfy you –

because I am simply not working in your frame of reference. My generosity is so foreign to you, that when I represent it by a man, the landowner in this parable, the man is like no man you've ever encountered.

This brings us to v.16: the last will be first and the first last. While there is a reversal here, it is crucial to note that it's a reversal which ends in total equality. No one is lost or excluded – all end up with a denarius. So let me try and tie all this into a coherent pattern.

IV. Conclusion

Fourth point, the conclusion. Contrary to first impressions, I do NOT believe we can read this parable as asserting equality of REWARDS in the kingdom, since other passages clearly speak of differing degrees of glory and reward. So, why the equality here? And what does it mean? The answer lies in the distinction between rewards IN the kingdom and the gift of the kingdom itself. The gift of the kingdom, the gift of eternal life comes to all equally, under the sovereign freedom of God.

You might say: well, if the kingdom is a free gift to all, why does the parable make that point in a context of work and labor and reward. I think the answer to that is that the kingdom is viewed as FUTURE here – the gift is received AFTER a lifetime of service, but not on the BASIS of the service. Jesus' point seems to be that those in the vineyard a long time, especially those who've sacrificed all like Peter and the disciples can become counters – they can fall into a notion of merit and reward that envy's the gift of the kingdom itself to those who come late.

The first workers have forgotten that they were once like the late-hired men and they also received the kingdom as a gift. The denarius is not a reward of merit; it is the ticket to enter the everlasting kingdom when our service has ended and everyone, in this sense, gets the same ticket. The generosity which gives the kingdom, which gives salvation, is wholly other than the contractual mindset the first-hired have fallen into. In this context the phrase: the first will be last and the last first means: order or length of service doesn't matter in God's bestowal the kingdom.

There is a Jewish writing from a few centuries before Christ which speaks of the judgment like a circle, it says: those who are last will not be behind, those who are first will not be in front. I believe that is the only sense of v.16 which can account for the equality of outcome here – order is indifferent in the bestowal of the kingdom.

In conclusion let me make two simple applications: first, we must not fall into the envy of the counters. We must give up comparing ourselves to others. Luke 17 says even when we've done ALL that God requires we are still unprofitable

servants. We are still debtors to grace alone. This is the error of the carping first-hired workers.

And second, we must not measure God's generosity by human calculation. He is no man's debtor and He freely bestows the kingdom, the same glorious everlasting kingdom on all – regardless of when they were hired into the vineyard. Praise be to God for His sovereign, inscrutable generosity, which bestows on us the kingdom.

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