

CARITAS FELLOWSHIP

Parables #4: *The Laborers in the Vineyard*

15 October 2009

**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.

20.1 “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.”

*\*Is your eye bad because I am good?*



Ian Pollack, “Laborers in the Vineyard”

**KLYNE SNODGRASS**

It is not that [this parable] presents numerous difficult issues; the problems are relatively easy, except for two: the identity of the original audience and the meaning of the parable.

**DEUTERONOMY 24.14,15**

“You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. 15 You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of sin.

**JONAH 3.10-4.4**

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

**PROVERBS 22.9; 28.22**

22.9 Whoever has a good eye will be blessed,  
for he shares his bread with the poor.

28.22 A man whose eye is evil hastens after wealth  
and does not know that poverty will come upon him.

**N.T. WRIGHT**

God's grace, in short, is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up. It isn't the sort of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. The point of the story is that what people get from having served God and his kingdom is not, actually, a "wage" at all. It's not, strictly, a reward for work done. God doesn't make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. He makes covenants, in which he promises us everything and asks of us everything in return. When he keeps his promises, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to his overflowing nature.

**CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA**

By "day" he means the whole age during which at different moments since the transgression of Adam he calls just individuals to their pious work, defining rewards for them for their actions. And so "around the first hour" are those at the time of Adam and Enoch; "at the third hour" are those in the time of Noah and Shem and the righteous descending from them, for the second time is also the second calling, when the laws were also different...

**CHRYSOSTOM**

By the vineyard he means the commandments of God, and the time of working refers to the present life. The workers—those called to the task at different times: ...are those who have come forward at different ages and lived justly.

**ST. THOMAS AQUINAS**

Envy is sorrow at another's good.

**DOROTHY SAYERS**

The names by which [Envy] offers itself to the world's applause are Right and Justice, and it makes a great parade of these austere virtues. It begins by asking, plausibly: "Why should I not enjoy what others enjoy?" and it ends by demanding: "Why should others enjoy what I may not?"

**GREGORY THE GREAT**

Since the obtaining of his kingdom comes from his good will, he properly adds, "Or am I not allowed to do as I wish?" It is always foolish to question the goodness of God. There might have been reason for loud complaint if he did not give what he owed but not if he gives what he does not owe.

**KLYNE SNODGRASS**

The principle of equal pay for equal work is a virtual presupposition of our sense of justice. Those who worked less should be paid less, but the owner gives all the same wage because without it those hired those hired later would not have enough to live on. Humans, then and now, are continually comparing themselves with others, trying to assess fairness and level of accomplishment, which is exactly what the disciples were doing. The only fact that causes the first hired workers to complain is the comparison of their wage with that of those hired later. As with most humans, justice is in their eyes that which gives no one else—not even the poor—an advantage; it is defined from a self-centered perspective... For most of us, injustice is what happens to our disadvantage, while what happens to our advantage is good luck...

Key in interpreting the parable is v.10: those hired first *thought* they would receive more. The parable breaks any chain of logic connecting reward, work, and human perceptions of justice, and lurking behind that statement is a whole theology of mercy...

**STANLEY HAUERWAS**

It is particularly important for Gentile Christians to remember that as heirs of the promise to Israel we are the last

hired. The decisive commentary on Jesus' parable of the vineyard is Paul's understanding of God's faithfulness to Israel developed in Rom (11. Paul writes to Gentile Christians to insist that God's promise to Israel remains in effect. Israel has stumbled on the stumbling block that is Jesus, but it has done so that salvation may come to the Gentiles (11.1-12). Accordingly, no account of the Church, of those last hired, can ever be intelligible without the story of Israel, and those who are inheritors of that story, the Jews...

The parable of the vineyard is no doubt about the abundance of God's grace, but crucial for the parable is that the owner told his manager to pay the last hired first. If he had begun by paying those hired first, they would not have known that all were being paid at the same rate. God's grace is the grace of truth refusing to hide from us the character of our envy of those whom we think undeserving. The parable of the vineyard exemplifies God's justice—a justice disciplined by the truth.

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**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**THE VENGROV TORAH**

Brith Sholom Beth Israel Synagogue  
182 Rutledge Avenue  
Sunday, 18 October, 2.00pm

**THE FEAST OF ST. LUKE, PATRON OF PHYSICIANS**

Church of the Holy Communion  
218 Ashley Avenue  
Monday, 19 October, 5.30pm

**“THE ART OF BREAKING BAD NEWS”**

Second Presbyterian Church  
342 Meeting Street  
Saturday, October 24, 9am—Noon