

The Parable of
THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20:1-16

by

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"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius [penny] a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. And again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no man has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. 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 my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen." Matthew 20:1-16 [NKJV]

The key to this parable is to be found in the words that go before and [those] that follow it. They are almost the same. The parable begins with the word "for," which joins it to the words that go before: *"But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first."* And at its close these words are repeated in almost the same form, with others added: *"So the last shall be first, and the first last. For many be called, but few chosen."* The explanation must clearly be looked for in these words. Bearing this in mind, let us first go through the parable and then consider its application.

Vineyard work was as common in that country as field work is with us. Laborers were often hired by the day only, and it is still the custom in some parts of the East for men to

stand in the marketplace to be hired. The penny was equal to about sevenpence halfpenny, and a penny was probably the usual day's wages. The day was reckoned by the Jews to begin at six o'clock. It was probably at that hour that the first laborers were hired, and the rest were hired at nine o'clock, twelve o'clock, three o'clock, and five o'clock. When these last were engaged, but one working hour remained.

There was nothing unusual in the hiring. Those hired for the whole day were to be paid the usual day's wages, and those hired afterwards were to receive what was right; that is, as they no doubt understood it, [their wages were to be] in proportion to the time they worked. But when the time of payment came, the laborers were dealt with by the master in a way that must have greatly surprised them. The first who were called to be paid were those hired last, at the eleventh hour, and they received a whole day's wages. Afterwards those hired at the ninth, sixth, and third hour were called in succession, and though it is not mentioned, they too no doubt received the same.

The first hired were the last paid. They had agreed for a penny a day, and that sum they received. But they were discontented. Though it was the sum for which they had bargained, yet they thought themselves unfairly treated, because others who had not worked nearly so long received the same. The master, however, would not listen to their complaint. There was no ground for it. Might he not do what he would with his own? Might he not give to whom he pleased? For a whole day's pay for an hour's work was almost a free gift. What was it to them if he chose to show such kindness? Let them take their due and depart. He had kept nothing from them of what was their right, though he had given to others what was far beyond their right.

The opening words of the parable show us that it is one of those in which our Lord teaches us about the kingdom of heaven; that is, the gospel dispensation and God's dealings with men under it. And the particular lesson here taught is that God claims the right of dealing with men according to his sovereign will, and that men's place hereafter, with regard to each other, will by no means always agree with their place now.

There are two distinct times marked out in the parable--the hiring and working-time on the one hand, the paying-time on the other. The former represents the present state, the latter the future.

In the present state, men are called into the outward and visible church at different times in their life, and some enjoy greater advantages and some less, and some fill higher stations and some lower. [However,] when the great day of account arrives, many changes will be made, "many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." Many a one who was the child of pious parents, and was brought up from his youth in the knowledge of God and in the habits of religion, will be placed below one who had no such early advantages and was brought to know God only late in life. Many who filled a high station in the church on earth, whose names were well known and whose influence was great, will then have to take their place below some of the poor and unlearned--poor, yet rich in faith

and in good works, unlearned in the wisdom of this world yet truly taught of God. For God judges not by the outward appearance but by the heart; and even now in his sight many of the first are last, and the last first.

What goes before the parable seems to show that we are to apply this even to worldly advantages. The young man who came to Christ had great possessions [Matt. 19:16-22]. In that respect he was among the first. Peter and the other disciples were poor, for even what they had they had given up for the sake of following Christ. They were therefore among the last. Yet while that unhappy young man would have no treasure in heaven because he would not leave all and follow Christ, Peter and all true disciples should receive a hundredfold and should inherit everlasting life. Thus the first should be last, and the last first. The first in riches would find those very riches a hindrance in their way, a hindrance from which the poor would be free.

But in the parable all the laborers received the same. How does this fall in with some being first and some last hereafter? The parable and the lesson seem here not to agree.

Perhaps they were not meant to agree on this point, for there are many parts in the parables which form only the circumstances, or scenery so to speak, without teaching any special lesson. Yet there is more agreement here than appears at first sight. For though the men who were hired last received only the same as those who were hired first--the same and no more--yet for the work done they received a great deal more. The first hired received a penny for a whole day's work [while] the last received the same for [just] one hour. They were [therefore] paid at a far higher rate, and so were first [in that respect]. Besides, they were paid first in order of time.

Whether much weight is to be given to this or not, at least it goes some way to help us out of the difficulty, for certainly the last hired were the first paid, and so the last were first.

Another question arises. What kind of people exactly are we to understand by those who are first now but will be last hereafter? The parable represents them as really called to work in the vineyard and bearing the burden and heat of the day and receiving wages. This would lead us to think them true Christians, though not of so high a stamp as those of the other class. But the case of the rich young man seems to prove the contrary. For he, as far as we know, never gained any part in the kingdom of heaven. Again, those who were hired first murmured at the others' receiving as much as they. But will any true Christian murmur at the grace and mercy bestowed on others, or at any of God's dealings under the gospel?

The question is by no means without difficulty, but I am disposed on the whole to take the words in the widest and most general sense. Those who are first now comprise those who are foremost in various respects; first in rank, first in wealth, first in gifts and influence, first in point of time, first in religious advantages, first in station in the church. Some such are true Christians, but some are not so. Some there are who have nothing of Christ

but the name, and though they are outwardly members of his church and thus by profession working in the Master's vineyard--and that perhaps all their lifelong--yet [they] are not really his. It must be observed that our Lord's words are, "*Many* that are first shall be last," not *all*.

This view is confirmed by what our Lord says at the close of the parable, "for many be called, but few chosen." The few chosen mean true Christians, real spiritual members of the church of Christ. The many called mean all professing Christians, whether real or nominal only. Those who will be first hereafter must be the chosen. Those who will be last must as certainly comprise numbers who are called but not chosen, Christians in name but not in heart.

True, there is another difficulty that meets us here. All the laborers received [wages] at the close of the day, and received the same. How then can some of them represent true disciples and some nominal Christians? We must not forget our *key*. Our Lord's words before and after the parable mark a clear difference between what will be received by the two classes, especially the words that follow the parable--"for many be called, but few chosen." Either, therefore, the equal sum received by all is merely one of the circumstances of the parable, or it has a meaning in agreement with the key.

In the latter case the meaning may be somewhat as follows: Though the sum received by all was the same, yet in some cases it was what had been bargained for--the just wages and no more. In others, it was a gift. The penny therefore may be meant to represent to us a different thing in the one case from that which it represents in the other. The laborer hired at the beginning of the day bargained for a penny, and a penny he received. God will never give a man less than his due. The self-righteous man, the formalist, the nominal Christian, the sinner--[all] will receive the due reward of his deeds, though that will not be eternal life. What he receives, such as it is, he has earned. A penny, the usual day's wages, seems fitly to represent this.

But the laborer hired at the eleventh hour made no bargain at all but trusted to the master to give him what should be right, and at the close of the day [he] received far more than he had earned. In the former case, justice paid the wages. In this case, it is grace that confers the gift. We may trace this difference in the very words of the parable: "*Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a penny? Take what is yours and go your way.*" Here is not a word of favor, mercy, or giving; it is bare justice--"I am doing you no wrong"--that is all. But in the other case, how different is the tone! "*I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.*" "*Is your eye evil because I am good?*" Here we see goodness and grace concerned.

Some have objected that the penny is thus made to mean one thing in the one case, and another thing in the other. In the one case [it is] the gift of eternal life through grace; in the other, that which a man receives as the fruit of his own works. The difficulty is acknowledged. Nevertheless, it does not seem fatal to this view.

Let a few words of a practical kind close the subject.

1. Let us have a deep conviction that all that God does is right. Even if we cannot see that it is so, let us humbly believe it. Here we see through a glass darkly, but hereafter we shall see face-to-face.

2. Let us trust in no mere outward advantages, whether temporal or spiritual--riches, station, power, the means of grace, a religious name, a high position of usefulness. Let us seek earnestly that we may not be of the number of those who are first now but shall be last hereafter. Let us seek to be humble, true, sincere, and of a spiritual mind.

3. If God has placed us among the last and lowest now, yet let us not complain, nor let us think that we cannot serve him. We may be poor or afflicted. We may have very little knowledge and very few opportunities of doing good. Let us take meekly and thankfully what God sends. We shall not always be poor; nay, we are not poor now if we have Christ! Our affliction is but a light affliction, and it is but for a moment. We are drawing near to the world to come, and there we shall find an exceeding and eternal weight of glory. And though our lot be low, yet can we do nothing for our Lord? And though we may but lately have learned to know him, yet can we not work for him for the rest of our days? Only let us love him and he will find us something to do, and we shall gladly do it.

4. Let none put off the great concern. As soon as they were called, at whatever hour of the day it was, these men went into the vineyard. Some who are continually being called are still putting off obeying the call. They will obey "later in life, not now." This is dangerous work. Your day may come to a close before you are aware. Now is the accepted time.

5. It was not through their own fault that some in the parable stood all the day idle; no man had hired them. But this cannot be said of those who are trifling life away, doing God no service and making no preparation for eternity. They are standing idle, and some have reached almost the end of their day; yet they have been called again and again, and are called still. Well may the words be addressed to such: "*Why have you been standing here idle all day?*" Eternity is near. You can never have your day again. Too much of your life has been wasted already, yet some remains. Do not waste what is left--"*You also go into the vineyard.*" Join yourselves to Christ by faith. Listen to him. Receive him as your Savior. Follow him, serve him, do his will. Then he will give you, not wages, but the gift of eternal life.

This excerpt is Chapter XXXV from *The Parables of Our Lord Explained and Applied* by Francois Bourdillon (New York: American Tract Society, 1876). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.