

The Parable of
THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20:1-16

by

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This parable stands in closest connexion with the words which went immediately before--that is, with the four concluding verses of the chapter preceding, and can only be rightly understood by their help; which being so, the actual division of chapters is here peculiarly unfortunate; often causing, as it does, the parable to be explained with no reference to the context, and with no attempt to trace the circumstances out of which it grew. And yet on a right tracing of this connexion, and the showing how it sprang out of, and was in fact an answer to, Peter's question, 'What shall we have?' the success of the exposition will mainly depend. It is a parable which stands only second to that of the Unjust Steward in the number and wide divergence from one another of the explanations that have been proposed for it; and only second to that, if indeed second, in the difficulties which it presents.¹ These Chrysostom states clearly and strongly; though few will be wholly satisfied with his solution of them. There is, first, the difficulty of bringing it into harmony with the saying by which it is introduced and concluded, and which it is plainly intended to illustrate; and secondly, there is the moral difficulty, the same which the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son presents,--namely, how can one who is himself a member of the kingdom of God 'be held,' as Chrysostom terms it, 'by that lowest of all passions, envy, and an evil eye,' grudging in his heart the favours shown to other members of that kingdom? or, if it be denied that the murmurers of this parable *are* members of that kingdom, how this denial is reconcilable with their having laboured all day long in the vineyard, and ultimately carrying away their own reward? And lastly, it is not easy, but most hard, to determine what is the drift and scope of the parable, its leading intention and purpose.

Of its many interpreters there are, first, those who see in the equal penny to all, the key to the whole matter, and for whom its lesson is this,--the equality of rewards in the kingdom of God.² This was Luther's explanation in his earlier works, though he afterwards saw reason to withdraw it. But however this may appear to agree with the parable,³ it evidently agrees not at all with the saying which sums it up, and contains its

¹ See the *Theol. Stud. u. Krit.* 1847, pp. 396-416.

² Augustine (*Serm.* 343): 'The penny is life eternal, which is alike for all;--but without affirming equality in the kingdom of God; for all the stars, as he goes on to say, are in the same firmament, yet 'one star differeth from another star in glory' (splendor dispar, cælum commune). Cf. *De Sanct. Virgin.* 26; *In Joh. Evang.* tract. lxxvii. §2; Tertullian, *De Monog.* 10; Bernard, *In Ps. Qui habitat, Serm.* ix. 4; Ambrose, *Ep.* vii. 11; Gregory the Great, *Moral.* iv. 36.

³ Yet Spanheim (*Dub. Evang.* vol. iii. p. 785) is not easily answered, when against

moral: *'Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first;'*⁴ for such an equality would be no reversing of the order of the first and last, but a setting of all upon a level.

Others affirm that the parable is meant to set forth this truth,--that God does not regard the length of time during which men are occupied in his work, but the fidelity and strenuous exertion with which they accomplish that work.⁵ Of this explanation there will presently be occasion to speak more at large; it will be enough now to observe that if everything had turned on the fact that the last-hired labourers had worked more strenuously than the first, it is impossible that all mention of this circumstance should have been omitted.

The same is Calvin's explanation; a little modified, it is true; but without substantial alterations. There is a warning here that we be not over-confident, because we may have begun well;⁶ lest (though this is not his illustration), like the hare in the fable, waxing careless and remiss, we let others pass us by; and so, from the first, fall into the hindmost rank: that no one begin to boast, or consider the battle won, till he put off his armour (1 Kin. 20:11). But to him also it may be replied that the parable affords no warrant for the assumption that the labourers first engaged had slackened their exertions during the latter part of the day.

There are others who find in the successive hours at which the different bands of labourers were hired, the leading feature of the parable. And these interpreters may be again subdivided, according as they regard these hours as successive ages in the world's history, or successive periods in the lives of individual men. There are, first, those who, as Irenaeus,⁷ Origen, and Hilary, see here a history of the different summonses to a work of righteousness which God has made to men from the beginning of the world,--to Adam,--to Noah,--to Abraham,--to Moses,--and lastly to the Apostles, bidding them, each in his

this he says: 'It is impossible to understand the penny as meaning eternal life, for it is given also to the murmurers and the envious, it does not satisfy those who receive it, and it is given to men who are bidden to depart from the Lord (ver. 14). But life eternal is not the portion of murmurers, nor of the envious, neither does it draw men away from God, but joins them with him, nor is it given unto any to whom it does not bring full satiety of joy.'

4 Fritzsche, indeed, finds no difficulty in giving the sense of the gnome thus: 'They who have been the last to join themselves to the Messiah shall be reckoned with those that were first, and they who followed Him first shall be reckoned with the last:' but this is doing evident violence to the words.

5 So Maldonatus: 'The end of the parable is that the reward of eternal life answers, not to the time which a man has laboured, but to his labour and the work he has done;' and Kuinoel the same.

6 'The aim of the Lord was none other than by continual incentives to spur his followers to progress. For we know that sluggishness is generally born of excessive confidence.' If we found, indeed, the gnome by itself, we might then say that such was his purpose in it: see the admirable use which Chrysostom (*In Matt. Hom.* 67, ad finem) makes of it, in this regard.

7 *Con. Hær.* iv. 36.7. His immediate object is to assert the unity of the Old Dispensation and the New, that one purpose ran through, and one God ordered, them both; the same who called patriarchs and prophets in the earlier hours calling Apostles in the last. He makes many of the parables, and some with better right than this, to teach this lesson.

time and order, to go work in his vineyard. Of these labourers, all the earlier lived during weaker and more imperfect dispensations, and underwent, therefore, a harder toil, as having less abundant gifts of the Spirit, less clear knowledge of the grace of God in Christ, to sustain them, than the later called, the members of the Christian Church. Their heavier toil, therefore, might aptly be set forth by a longer period of work, and that at the more oppressive time of the day (cf. Acts 15:10); while the Apostles, and the other faithful called into God's vineyard at the eleventh hour ('the last time,' or, 'the last *hour*,' as St. John [1 Ep. ii. 18] terms it), and partakers of the larger freer grace now given in Christ, had by comparison a lighter burden to endure. But of these interpreters, it may be fairly asked, *When* could that murmuring have taken place, even supposing God's servants of one age *could* thus grudge because of the larger grace bestowed upon others? This could not have been in their lifetime; for before the things were even revealed which God had prepared for his people that came after, they were in their graves. It is still less conceivable as finding place in the day of judgment, or in the kingdom of love made perfect. Unless, then, we quite explain away the murmuring, accepting Chrysostom's ingenious solution of it, that it is only brought in to enhance the greatness of the things freely given in the last days, things so glorious, that those earlier and more scantily endowed might be tempted to murmur, comparing themselves with their more richly furnished successors,--this explanation seems untenable; as, were it worth while, much more might be urged against it.

The other subdivision of this group of interpreters see in the different hours at which the labourers are hired, different periods in men's lives, at which they enter on the Lord's work; affirming that its purpose is to encourage those who have entered late on his service, now to labour heartily, not allowing the consciousness of past negligences to make slack their hands; since they too, if only they will labour with their might for the time, long or short, which remains, shall receive with the others a full reward. This is, in the main Chrysostom's view:⁸ but with a free admission that, under certain limitations, such encouragement may be drawn from the parable, it is another thing to say that this is the admonishment which it is especially meant to convey. In what living connexion would the parable then stand with what went before, with Peter's question, or with the temper out of which that question grew, and which this teaching of the Lord was intended to meet and to correct?

But nearer to the truth than all these explanations is that which finds here a warning and a prophecy of the causes which would lead to the rejection of the Jews, the first called into the vineyard of the Lord;--these causes being mainly their proud appreciation of themselves and of their own work; their displeasure at seeing the Gentiles, aliens so long, put on the same footing, admitted to equal privileges, with themselves in the kingdom of

⁸ And also Jerome's (*Comm. in Matt.*): 'The labourers of the first hour seem to me to be Samuel and Jeremiah and John the Baptist, who can say with the Psalmist, Thou art my God even from my mother's womb. The labourers of the third hour, those who began to serve God in their youth. Of the sixth hour, those who have taken on them the yoke of Christ in their maturity. Of the ninth, those who are verging on old age. Of the eleventh, those who are in the extremity of age. And yet all alike receive their reward, although their labour is different.'

God:⁹ and an agreement or covenant being made with the first hired, and none with those subsequently engaged, has been urged as confirming this view. No interpretation of the parable can be true which excludes this application of it. It *was* notably fulfilled in the Jews; while yet this fulfilment of it was only one fulfilment out of many; for our Lord's words are so rich in meaning, so touch the central heart of things, that they are continually finding their fulfilment. Had this, however, been his primary meaning, we should expect to hear of but two bands of labourers, the first hired and the last: all who come between would only serve to confuse and perplex. The solution sometimes given of this objection,--that the successive hirings represent successive summonses to the Jews; first, under Moses and Aaron; secondly, under David and the kings; thirdly, under the Maccabean chiefs and priests; and lastly, in the time of Christ and his Apostles; or that these are severally Jews, Samaritans, and proselytes of greater and less strictness,--seems devised merely to escape from an embarrassment, and only witnesses for its existence without removing it.

Better then to say that the parable is directed against a wrong temper and spirit of mind, which, indeed, was notably manifested in the Jews, but one against which all men in possession of spiritual privileges, have need to be, and herein are, warned: this warning being primarily addressed not to them, but to the Apostles, as the foremost workers in the Christian Church, the earliest called to labour in the Lord's vineyard--*'the first,'* both in time, and in toil and pains. They had seen the rich young man (19:22) go sorrowful away, unable to abide the proof by which the Lord had mercifully revealed to him how strong the bands by which the world was holding him still. They (for Peter here, as so often, is spokesman for all) would fain know what *their* reward should be, who had done this very thing from which he had shrunk, and forsaken all for the Gospel's sake (ver. 27). The Lord answers them first and fully, that they and as many as should do the same for his sake, should reap an abundant reward (ver. 28, 29). But for all this the question itself, 'What shall we have?' was not a right one; it put their relation to their Lord on a wrong footing; there was a tendency in it to bring their obedience to a calculation of so much work, so much reward. There lurked too a certain self-complacency in it. That spirit of self-exalting comparison of ourselves with others, which is so likely to be stirring, when we behold any signal failure on their part, was obscurely at work in them; so obscurely that they may have been hardly conscious of it themselves; but He who knew what was in man, saw with a glance into the depths of Peter's heart, and having replied to the direct question, 'What shall we have?' went on to crush the evil in the bud, and before it should unfold itself further. 'Not of works, lest any man should boast;' this was the truth which they were in danger of missing, and which He would now by the parable enforce; and if nothing of works, but all of grace for all, then no glorifying of one over another, no grudging of one against another, no claim as of right upon the part of any.¹⁰ In that

9 Cocceius: 'Here is hinted the future murmuring and indignation of the Jews against the Gentiles: for the presumption of the Jews is, that in the kingdom of Christ the Gentiles should be subject to themselves, and ought not to attain their reward, unless they also have laboured as the Jews laboured for many centuries.' See, in favour of this explanation, Greswell, *Expos. of the Par.* vol. iv. p. 370, sqq.

10 Gerhard: 'Just at the end, because the confidence of Peter and the rest was not unknown to Christ, and there was reason to fear that on the strength of this

question of theirs there spake out something of the spirit of the hireling, and it is against this spirit that the parable is directed, which might justly be entitled, *On the nature of rewards in the kingdom of God*,--the whole finding a most instructive commentary in Rom. 4:1-4, which supplies not a *verbal*, but more deeply interesting, a *real* parallel to the parable before us.

So far as it is addressed to Peter, and in him to all true believers, it is rather a warning against what *might* be, if they were not careful to watch against it, than a prophecy of what *would* be.¹¹ For we cannot conceive of him who dwells in love as allowing himself in envious and grudging thoughts against any of his brethren, because, though they have entered later on the service of God, or been engaged in a lighter labour, they will yet be sharers with him of the same heavenly reward; or refusing to welcome them gladly to all the blessings and privileges of the communion of Christ. Least of all can we imagine him so to forget that he also is saved by grace, as to allow such hateful feelings to come to a head, taking form and shape, which they do in the parable; or as justifying these to himself and to God, like the spokesman among the murmurers here. We cannot conceive this even here in our present imperfect state, much less in the perfected kingdom hereafter; for love 'rejoiceth in the truth,'¹² and the very fact of one so grudging against another would prove that he himself did not dwell in love, and therefore was under sentence of exclusion from that kingdom.¹³ It is then a warning to the Apostles, and through them to all believers, of what might be, not a prophecy of what shall be for any who share in the final reward. They are taught that, however long continued their work, abundant their labours, yet without this charity to their brethren, this humility before God, they are nothing;--that pride and a self-complacent estimate of their work, like the fly in the precious ointment, would spoil the work, however great it might be, since that work stands only in humility; and from first they would fall to last.--There is then this difference between the parabolic framework, and the truth of which it is the exponent, that while the householder could not with equity altogether deprive the first labourers of their hire, notwithstanding their pride and discontent, they therefore receiving their wages, and only punished by a severe rebuke, yet the lesson taught to Peter, and through

magnificent promise they might exalt themselves above others, He brings this passage to a close with a weighty sentence, by which He desires to restrain them, and especially Peter, in sobriety and fear: "Many," He says, "that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." . . . Refrain therefore from all high thoughts, refrain from considering arrogantly of yourselves.' So also Olshausen, who refers to ver. 20-28 of this chapter (cf. Mark 10:35), as an evidence how liable the promise (19:28) was to be perverted and misunderstood by the old man not yet wholly mortified in Apostles themselves.

11 Bengel: 'With respect to the Apostles, it is not a prediction but a warning.'

12 In the beautiful words of Leighton (*Prælect.* 6): 'Envy is far from the heavenly choir, and there reigns there the most perfect charity by which everyone at the same time as by his own is possessed and made happy by the felicity of his fellow, rejoicing in that as in his own. Whence there is among them a certain infinite reflection and multiplication of happiness, like as would be the splendour of a hall shining with gold and gems, and a full assembly of kings and magnates, and whose walls were covered on every side with the most luminous mirrors.'

13 Gregory the Great says excellently (*Hom.* 19 in *Evang.*) on this murmuring: 'No one who murmurs receives the kingdom of heaven; no one who receives it will be able to murmur.'

him to us all, is, that the first may be altogether last; that those who stand forward as chief in labour, yet, if they forget withal that the reward is of grace and not of works, and begin to boast and exalt themselves above their fellow-labourers, may *altogether* lose the things which they have wrought;¹⁴ while those who seem last, may yet, by keeping their humility, be acknowledged first and foremost in the day of God. With these preliminary remarks, which the difficulties of the parable have made it necessary to draw out at some length, we may now proceed to consider its details.

'The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.' in other words, The manner of God's dealings with those whom He calls to the privilege of working in his Church is like to that of a householder, who should go out early in the morning to hire labourers.¹⁵ Here as ever in the kingdom of heaven it is God who seeks his labourers, and not they who seek Him: 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you' (John 15:16; Mark 3:13; Luke 5:10; John 1:43; 1 Tim. 1:12). Every summons to a work in the heavenly vineyard is from the Lord. The original impulse is always his: all which is man's in the matter is, that he do not resist the summons, which it is his melancholy prerogative that he is able to do. It is 'a call,' according to the instructive Scriptural expression: but as in the natural world a call does not imply the exercise of force, may be obeyed or may be disregarded, so also is it in the spiritual.

*'And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.'*¹⁶ The different footing upon which the different bands of labourers went to their work, would scarcely have been so expressly noted, if no signification were to be found therein. An agreement was made by these first-hired labourers before they entered on their labour, the same which Peter would have made, 'What shall we have?'--while those subsequently engaged went in a more simple spirit, relying on the householder's assurance that whatever was right, they should receive. Have we here already a hint of that wrong spirit on the part of some, which presently comes to a head (ver. 11, 12); on the part of others, a truer spirit of humble waiting upon the Lord, in full confidence that He will give far more than his servants can desire or deserve, that He is not unrighteous to forget any

14 Gregory the Great again (*Moral.* xix. 21): 'Everything which is done perishes if it is not anxiously preserved in humility.'

15 Fleck: 'The comparison applies not to a single person, but to the whole action,'--a remark of frequent application.

16 A denarius, a Roman silver coin, which passed current as equal to the Greek drachm, though in fact some few grains lighter. It was = 8 1/2 *d.* at the latter end of the Commonwealth, afterwards something less, of our money. It was not an uncommon, though a liberal, day's pay (see Tob. 5:14). It was the daily pay of a Roman legionary (Tacitus, *Ann.* iii. 17.26; Pliny, *H.N.* xxxiii.3). Morier, in his *Second Journey through Persia*, p. 265, mentions having noted in the market-place at Hamadan a custom like that assumed in the parable:--'Here we observed every morning before the sun rose, that a numerous band of peasants were collected with spades in their hands, waiting to be hired for the day to work in the surrounding fields. This custom struck me as a most happy illustration of our Saviour's parable, particularly when passing by the same place late in the day, we still found others standing idle, and remembered his words, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" as most applicable to their situation; for on putting the very same question to them, they answered us, "Because no man hath hired us."'

labour of love which is wrought for Him?¹⁷

At the third, at the sixth, and at the ninth hour,--or at nine in the morning, at midday, and at three in the afternoon,¹⁸--the householder again went into the market-place,¹⁹ and those whom he found waiting there, sent into his vineyard; incidents which call for no remark, as first and last are the only ones on whom the stress of the parable is found ultimately to rest. *'And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?'* All activity out of Christ, all labour that is not labour in his Church, is in his sight a *'standing idle.'* *'They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us.'* There lay a certain amount of implied rebuke in the question, *'Why stand ye idle?'* which this answer shall clear away; for it belongs to the idea of the parable, that their explanation should be regarded as perfectly satisfactory. It is not then in a Christian land, where men grow up under sacramental obligations, with the pure word of God sounding in their ears, that this answer could be given; or at least, only in such woeful instances as that which, alas! our own land at the present affords, where in the bosom of the Church multitudes have been allowed to grow up ignorant of the blessings which her communion affords, and the responsibilities which this lays upon them; and even in *their* mouths there would only be a partial truth in this, *'No man hath hired us;'* since even they cannot be *altogether* ignorant of their Christian vocation. Only when the kingdom of God is first set up in a land, enters as a new and hitherto unknown power, could any with full truth reply, *'No man hath hired us:--if we have been living in disobedience to God, it has been because we were ignorant of Him; if we were serving Satan, it was because we knew no other master and no better service.'*

While then the excuse which these labourers plead, appertains not to them who, growing up within the Church, have despised to the last, or nearly to the last, God's repeated biddings to go work in his vineyard; while the unscriptural corollary cannot be appended to the parable,²⁰ that it matters little at what time of men's lives they enter heartily upon

¹⁷ Thus Bernard, in a passage (*In Cant. Serm. xvi. 4*) containing many interesting allusions to this parable: 'The Jew relies on the compact of an agreement, I on the good pleasure of his will.'

¹⁸ These would not, except just at the equinoxes, be exactly the hours, for the Jews, as well as the Greeks and Romans, divided the natural day, that between sunrise and sunset, into twelve equal parts (John 11:9), which parts must of course have been considerably longer in summer than in winter; for though the difference between the longest and the shortest day is not so great in Palestine as with us, yet it is by no means trifling; the longest day is of 14h 12m duration, the shortest of 9h 48m, with a difference therefore of 4h 24m, so that an hour on the longest day would be exactly 22m longer than an hour on the shortest. The equinoctial hours did not come into use until the fourth century (see the *Dict. of Gr. and Roman Antt. s.v. Hora*, p. 485). Probably the day was also divided into the four larger parts here indicated, just as the Roman night into four watches, and indeed the Jewish no less: the four divisions of the latter are given in a popular form, Mark 13:35 (see Schoettgen, *Hor. Heb. vol. i. p. 136*).

¹⁹ Maldonatus: 'The whole world which is outside the Church.'

²⁰ The Author of a modern Latin essay, *De Sera Resipiscentia*, desirous to rescue the parable from such dangerous abuse, urges that it should have been otherwise framed, if such were its doctrine: 'He ought then to have said: The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man who went out early in the morning to hire labourers

his service, how long they despise his vows which have been upon them from the beginning; yet one would not therefore deny that there is such a thing even in the Christian Church as men being called,--or to speak more correctly, since they were called long before,--as men obeying the call and entering the Lord's vineyard, at the third, or sixth, or ninth, or even the eleventh hour. Only their case will be parallel not to that of any of these labourers--in regard of being able to make the same excuse as they did, but rather to that of the son, who, bidden to go work in his father's vineyard, at first refused, but afterwards repented and went (Matt. 21:28); and one of these, instead of clearing himself as respects the past, which these labourers do, will humble himself most deeply, while he considers all his neglected opportunities and the long-continued despite which he has done to the Spirit of grace. Yet while thus none can plead, '*No man hath hired us,*' in a land where the Christian Church has long been established, and the knowledge of Christ more or less brought within the reach of all, the parable is not therefore without its application in such; since there also will be many entering into the Lord's vineyard at different periods, even to a late one, of their lives; and who, truly repenting their past unprofitableness, and not attempting to excuse it, may find their work, be it brief or long, graciously accepted now, and may share hereafter in the full rewards of the kingdom.²¹ For in truth time belongs not to the kingdom of God. Not 'How much hast thou done?' but 'What are thou now?' will be the great question of the last day. Of course we must never forget that all which men have *done* will greatly affect what they *are*; yet still the parable is a protest against the whole *quantitative* appreciation of men's works, as distinct from the *qualitative*, against all which would make the works the end, and man the means, instead of the man the end, and the works the means--against that scheme which,

for his vineyard. And he found such, and made them very great promises, but they rejected his offers, and preferred to remain in the market-place in order to play and drink. At the third hour he returned, and made them the same offers, beseeching them more earnestly, but in vain. The same did he at the sixth hour, and at the ninth, but his offers and promises were always fruitless. Nay, the men even received him badly, and rudely told him that they did not wish to work for him. But not even so was he offended, but returned when only one hour of the day remained, and offered them the same sum as in the morning. Then the men, seeing that they could earn so great a sum by the labour of a moment, at last suffered themselves to be persuaded, looking especially at this, that the day was nearly spent before they came into the vineyard.' Augustine (*Serm.* lxxxvii. 6) has the same line of thought: 'Did the men who were hired for the vineyard, when the master of the house came out to them, to hire those whom he found at the third hour...did they say: We are not coming except at the sixth hour: or did those whom he found at the sixth hour say: We are not coming except at the ninth hour....As just as much is to be given to all alike, why are we to have more toil?--What He will give, and what He will do, it rests with him to determine. Do thou come when thou art called.' Cf. Gregory of Nazianzum, *Orat.* xl. 20, against those who used this parable as an argument for deferring baptism.

²¹ This view is supported by Leo the Great (*De Voc. Omn. Gent.* i.17): 'Without doubt the men who were sent into the vineyard at the eleventh hour, and joined the others who had toiled the whole day, prefigure their lot, whom, to recommend the excellency of grace, at the close of day and the end of life, the Divine indulgence rewards, not as paying a price for their labour, but as outpouring the riches of its goodness upon those of whom it has made election without works; that they also who have sweated in much labour and yet have received no more than the last-comers, may understand that they have received a gift of grace, and not a reward for their works.'

however unconsciously, lies at the root of so many of the confusions in our theology at this day.²² Against all these the words of the householder, '*Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive,*' are a living protest.

'*So when even was come*' (cf. Ps. 104:23; Judg. 19:16), '*the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.*' This householder will fulfil strictly the precept of the law; the hired labourer shall not have his payment deferred till to-morrow: 'At his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it' (Deut. 24:15; cf. Lev. 19:13; Job 7:2; Mal. 3:5; Jam. 5:4; Tob. 4:14). Christ is the '*steward,*' or overseer rather, set over all God's house (Heb. 3:6; John 5:27; Matt. 11:27). The whole economy of salvation has been put into his hands, and as part of this the distribution of rewards (Rev. 2:7, 10, 17, 28, &c.). The last hired, those who came in without any agreement made, the labourers of the eleventh hour, are the first to be paid. '*They received every man a penny.*' Here is encouragement--not to delay entering on God's service till late in our lives; for everywhere in Scripture there waits a marked blessing on early piety--but encouragement for those who have so done to work for the time which remains heartily and with their might. Misgivings concerning the acceptance of their work do not make men work the more strenuously; on the contrary, go far to cut the nerves of all exertion. There is much here to dispel such misgivings in those who would be most likely to feel them: let them labour in hope; they too shall be sharers in a full salvation.

It may be securely inferred that all between the last and the first hired received the penny as well; though it is the first hired alone who remonstrates, as those in whose case the injustice, for so it seemed to them, appeared the most flagrant. To assume, with Chrysostom, Maldonatus, Hammond, Waterland, and Olshausen, that these first hired had been doing their work negligently by comparison, while the last hired, such for instance as a Paul, whom Origen, quoting 1 Cor. 15:10, suggests, had done it with their

²²This mechanical, as opposed to the dynamic, idea of righteousness, is carried to the extremest point in the Chinese theology. Thus in that remarkable *Livre des recompenses et des peines*, the mechanical, or to speak more truly, the arithmetical, idea of righteousness comes out with all possible distinctness. For example, p. 124: 'To become immortal a man must have amassed three thousand merits and eight hundred virtuous actions.' How glorious, on the other hand, are Thauler's words upon the way in which men may have restored to them 'the years which the canker-worm has eaten': 'We may here inquire by what means a man can ever recover lost time, since there is no moment so brief and so fleeting that we do not owe it to God our Creator in its entirety, and with all our virtue and ability. But on this side there is a most healthful counsel offered us. Let a man turn himself with all his powers, lowest and highest alike, from all consideration of space and time, and let him betake himself to that Now of eternity, where God in his essence exists in an enduring Now. There neither is anything past nor future. There the beginning and end of all time are present. There, that is to say in God, all that was lost is found. And those who make it their custom to merge themselves yet more often in God, and to dwell in Him, these become rich even to excess, nay, they find more than they can lose. . . . Lastly, everything that has been neglected, everything that has been lost, in the most precious treasury of the Passion of the Lord, they can find and recover.'

might, and had in fact accomplished as much in their hour as the others in their day, is to assume that of which there is no slightest trace in the narrative. And more than this, such an assumption effectually turns the edge of the parable, defeats its whole purpose and intention; for what does it teach, if it does not teach us this, namely that men may do and suffer much, infinitely more than others, and yet be rejected, while those others are received,--that first may be last, and last first? It is nothing strange that a rationalist like Kuinoel should adopt this explanation; for the whole matter is thus taken out of a higher spiritual world, and brought down to the commonest region of sense; since if one man accomplishes as much in a single hour as another in twelve, there is nothing wonderful in his receiving an equal reward. Every difficulty disappears,--except indeed this, how the Lord should have cared to utter a parable for the justifying of so very ordinary a transaction; or, doing this, should have omitted that one thing which constituted the justification. But indeed this interpretation exactly brings us back to the level, from which to raise us the parable was spoken; we have a Jewish,²³ instead of an Evangelical, parable; an affirmation that the reward is not of grace, but of debt,--the very error which it was meant to rebuke and to reprove.

When the first hired received the same sum as the others and no more, *'they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.'*²⁴ These

²³ Singularly enough, exactly such a one is quoted by Lightfoot and others from the Talmud. Of a famous Rabbi, who died young, it is asked, 'To what was R. Bon Bar Chaija like? To a king who hired many labourers, among whom there was one hired who performed his task surpassingly well. What did the king? He took him aside, and walked with him to and fro. When even was come, those labourers came, that they might receive their hire, and he gave him a complete hire with the rest. And the labourers murmured, saying, "We have laboured hard all the day, and this man only two hours, yet he hath received as much wages as we." The king saith to them, "He hath laboured more in those two hours than you in the whole day." So R. Bon plied the law more in eight-and-twenty years than another in a hundred years.' Cf. the *Spicilegium* of L. Capellus, p. 28.--Von Hammer (*Fundgruben d. Orients*, vol. i. p. 157) quotes from the *Sunna*, or collection of Mahomet's traditional sayings, what reads like a distorted image of this parable. The Jew, the Christian, the Mahomedan are likened to three different bands of labourers, hired at different hours, at morning, midday, and afternoon. The latest hired receive in the evening twice as much as the others. It ends thus: 'The Jews and Christians will complain and say, "Lord, Thou hast given two carats to these, and only one to us." But the Lord will say, "Have I wronged you in your reward?" They answer, "No." "Then learn that the other is an overflowing of my grace."' See the same with immaterial differences in Gerock, *Christol. d. Koran*, p. 141; and Mohler (*Verm. Schrift.* vol. i. p. 355) mentions that, when claiming prophetic intimations of their faith in our Scriptures, the Mahomedans refer to this parable and its successive bands of labourers.

²⁴ Καυσων, the dry scorching east wind (Isai. 49:10; Ezek. 19:12; Jam. 1:11), so fatal to all vegetable life, 'the wind from the wilderness' (Hos. 13:15), of which Jerome says (*Com. in Os.* iii. 11): 'Καυσωνα, i.e. dryness, or the burning wind which is the bane of flowers, and wastes everything that buds;' 'the scorching heat,' as it is rendered in the Revised Version = καυμα της ημερας (2 Kin. 4:5). It has much in common with, though it is not altogether so deadly as, the desert wind Sam or Samiel, which is often fatal to life; and whose effects Venema (*Comm. in Ps.* xci. 6) thus describes: 'Mixed with poisoned particles the wind penetrates our inmost parts with its poisoned heat, and bears

other, they would say, have been labouring not merely for a far shorter time; but when they entered on their tasks it was already the cool of the evening, when toil is no longer so oppressive, while we have borne the scorching heat of the middle noon. But here the perplexing dilemma meets us, Either these are of the number of God's faithful people;-- how then can they murmur against Him, and grudge against their fellow-servants? or they are not of that number;--what then can we understand of their having laboured the whole day through in his vineyard, and actually carrying away at last the penny, the reward of eternal life? It is an unnatural way of escaping the difficulty, to understand "*Take that which is thine,*" as meaning, 'Take the damnation which belongs to thee, the just punishment of thy pride and discontent;' or as Basil the Great has it, 'Take the earthly reward, the "hundredfold" promised in this present time, but lose the "everlasting life," which thou shouldst have had in addition' (Matt. 19:29).²⁵ Theophylact and others seek to mitigate as much as possible the guilt of their murmuring, and see in it no more than the expression of that surprise and admiration²⁶ which will escape from some, at the unexpected position that others, of perhaps small account here, will occupy in the future kingdom of glory.²⁷ But the expression of their discontent is too strong, and the rebuke that it calls out too severe, to admit of an extenuation such as this. Better to say that no analogy will be found for this murmuring in the future world of glory;--and only where there is a large admixture of the old corruption, in the present world of grace. There is here rather a teaching by contraries; as thus, 'Since you cannot conceive such a spirit as that here held up before you, and which you feel to be so sinful and hateful, finding room in the perfected kingdom of God, check betimes its beginnings; check all inclinations to look grudgingly at your brethren, who, having lingered and loitered long, have yet found a place beside yourselves in the kingdom of grace, and are sharers in the same spiritual privileges;²⁸ or to look down upon and despise those who occupy a less important field of labour, who are called in the providence of God to endure and suffer less than yourselves: repress all inclinations to pride yourselves on your own doings, as though they gave you a claim of right upon God, instead of accepting all of his undeserved mercy, and confessing that you as well as others must be saved by grace and by grace alone.

with it most instant and agonizing destruction. Men's bodies are of a sudden attacked with loathsome disease and become putrid.' A grand passage in Palgrave's *Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia* describes the terrors of a simoom.

25 *Reg. Brev. Tract. Interr.* 255, 259.

26 Bellarmine: 'It seems to signify wonder rather than complaint.'

27 So Gregory the Great (*Hom. 19 in Evang.*), though with particular reference to the saints of the Old Testament: 'This is as if to have murmured because the fathers of old before the coming of the Lord were not brought unto the kingdom; for these lived rightly for the receiving of the kingdom, and yet their receiving of the kingdom was long delayed.' Origen in the same spirit quotes Heb. 11:39, 40.

28 There are many interesting points of comparison, as Jerome has observed, between this parable and that of the Prodigal Son; and chiefly between the murmuring labourers in this, and the elder brother in that. They had borne the burden and heat of the day--he had served his father these many years; they grudged to see the labourers of the eleventh hour made equal with themselves--he to see the Prodigal received into the full blessings of his father's house; the lord of the vineyard remonstrates with them for their narrow-heartedness--and in like manner the father with him.

On the fact that the murmurers actually receive their penny, a Roman Catholic expositor ingeniously remarks that the denarius or penny was of different kinds; there was the double, the treble, the fourfold; that of brass, of silver, and of gold. The Jew (for he applies the parable to Jew and Gentile) received what was his, his penny of the meaner metal, his earthly reward, and with that went his way; but the Gentile the golden penny, the spiritual reward, grace and glory, admission into the perfected kingdom of God. Ingenious as this is, no one will accept it as a fair explanation of the difficulty; and yet it may suggest valuable considerations. The penny *is* very different to the different receivers; *objectively* the same, *subjectively* it is very different; it is in fact to every one exactly what he will make it.²⁹ What the Lord said to Abraham, He says to each and to all, 'I am thy exceeding great reward;' and He has no other reward to impart to any save only this, namely Himself. To 'see Him as He is,' this is his one reward, the penny which is common to all. But they whom these murmuring labourers represent had been labouring for something else besides the knowledge and enjoyment of God, with an eye to some other reward, to something on account of which they could glory in themselves, and glory over others. It was not merely to have *much* which they desired, but to have *more* than others; not to grow together with the whole body of Christ, but to get before and beyond their brethren:³⁰ and therefore the penny, because common to all, did not seem

29 Thus Aquinas, in answer to the question whether there will be degrees of glory in the heavenly world, replies that in one sense there will, in another there will not: 'It happens that one man has more perfect enjoyment of God than another because the one is better disposed and regulated for the enjoyment of him;'-and again: 'Virtue will be like a material disposition, proportioned to the grace and glory to be received.' There is *one* vision of God; but there are very different capacities for enjoying that vision, as is profoundly expressed by the circles concentric, but ever growing smaller and thus nearer to the centre of light and life, in the *Paradiso* of Dante. Augustine (*Enarr. in Ps. lxxii. 1*) carries yet further this of the one vision of God for all: he compares it to the light which gladdens the healthy eye, but torments the diseased (non mutatus, sed mutatum).--It was a favourite notion with the Mystics that God would not put forth a twofold power to punish and reward, but the same power acting differently on different natures; as, to use their own illustration, the same heat hardens the clay and softens the wax. The Zend-Avesta supplies a parallel: All, it is there said, in the world to come will have to pass through the same stream; but this stream will be as warm milk to the righteous, while to the wicked it will be as molten brass.

30 The true feeling is expressed by Augustine: 'The inheritance in which we are co-heirs with Christ is not diminished by the multitude of sons, nor does it become smaller by the number of the sharers in it. But it is as large to many as to few, as large to each one as to all together;' and in a sublime passage, *De Lib. Arbit. ii. 14*, where of Truth, the heavenly bride, he exclaims: 'She receives all her lovers, and they are in nowise jealous of each other; she is open to all, and is chaste to each;' and by Gregory, who says: 'He who desires to escape the fires of jealousy, let him seek that love, which no number of sharers in it ever narrows.' The same is beautifully expressed by Dante, *Purgat. 15*, beginning,

Com' esser puote che un ben distributo
In più posseditor faccia più ricchi
Di sè, che se da pochi è posseduto?

'How can it be that a good distributed makes the more possessors richer in it, than if it is possessed by few?'--*Butler*.

enough, while in fact it was to each what he would make it. For if the vision of God shall constitute the blessedness of the coming world, then they whose spiritual eye is most enlightened, will drink in most of his glory; then, since only like can know like, all advances which are here made in humility, in holiness, in love, are a polishing of the mirror that it may reflect more distinctly the divine image, a purging of the eye that it may see more clearly the divine glory, an enlarging of the vessel that it may receive more amply of the divine fulness; just as, on the other hand, all pride, all self-righteousness, all sin of every kind, whether it stop short with impairing, or end by altogether destroying, the capacities for receiving from God, is in its degree a staining of the mirror, a darkening of the eye, a narrowing of the vessel.³¹ In the present case, where pride and envy and self-esteem had found place, darkening the eye of the heart, the reward as a consequence seemed no reward; it did not appear enough;³² instead of being exactly what each was willing, or rather had prepared himself, to make it.

"But he answered one of them,, ' the loudest and foremost as we may suppose in the utterance of his discontent, 'and said, Friend,³³ I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?' 'Friend' is commonly a word of address, as it would be among ourselves, from a superior to an inferior, and in Scripture is a word of an evil omen, seeing that, besides the present passage, it is the compellation used to the guest who wanted a wedding garment, and to Judas when he came to betray his Master (Matt. 22:12; 26:50).--'I do thee no wrong;' he justifies his manner of dealing with them, as well as his sovereign right in his own things. They had put their claim on the footing of right, and on that footing they are answered. 'Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?' (with which compare Rom. 9:20-24; Isai. 29:16; 45:9); 'Is thine eye³⁴ evil, because I am good? so long as I am just to thee, may I not be good and liberal to others?' The solution of the difficulty that these complainers should get their reward and carry it away with them, has been already suggested, namely that, according to the human relations to which the parable must adapt itself, it would not have been consistent with equity to make them forfeit their own hire, notwithstanding the wrong feeling which they displayed. Yet we

31 Bellarmine (*De Æter. Felic. Sanct.* v.): 'The penny signifies eternal life; but just as the same sun is seen more clearly by the eagle than by other birds, and the same fire warms those close to it better than those who are far off, so in this same eternal life one will see more clearly and rejoice more joyously than another.'

32 As Seneca has well said: 'He whose eyes are on the goods of another, is ill content with his own; '--and again: 'No one can at once grudge and be grateful.'

33 *Ἐταίρε*, in the Vulgate, Amice: but Augustine (*Serm.* lxxxvii. 3), *Sodalis*, which is better. Our 'fellow' contains too much of contempt in it, though else the most accurate rendering of all.

34 Envy is ever spoken of as finding its expression from the eye, Deut. 15:9; 1 Sam. 18:9 ('Saul eyed David'); Prov. 23:6; 28:22; Tob. 4:7; Ecclus. 14:10; 31:13; Mark 7:22; indeed the word *invidia* says as much, being, as Cicero observes (*Tusc.* iii.9), *à nimis intuendo fortunam alterius*. There lies in the expression the belief, one of the widest spread in the world, of the eye being able to put forth positive powers of mischief. Thus in Greek the *ὄφθαλμος βασκανός*, and *βασκαινεῖν = φθονεῖν* (see Bishop Lightfoot, *Ep. to the Galatians*, p. 127); in Italian, the *mal-occhio*; in French, the *mauvais-œil*; in Persius: *Urentes oculi*. See Becker, *Charicles*, vol. ii. p. 291. We have on the other hand the *ἀγαθός ὄφθαλμος*, the ungrudging eye (Ecclus. 32:10, LXX).

may say their reward vanished in their hands; and the sentences which follow sufficiently indicate that with God an absolute forfeiture might follow, nay, must necessarily follow, where this grudging, unloving, proud spirit has come to its full head; as much is affirmed in the words which immediately follow, '*So the last shall be first, and the first last.*' Many expositors have been sorely troubled how to bring these words into agreement with the parable; for in it '*first*' and '*last*' are all set upon the same footing: while here it is rather a reversing of places which is asserted: those who seemed highest, it is declared shall be set the lowest, and the lowest highest: when too we compare Luke 13:30, where the words recur, there can be no doubt that a total rejection of the '*first*,' the unbelieving Jews, accompanied with the receiving of the '*last*,' the Gentiles, into covenant, is declared. Origen, whom Maldonatus follows, finds an explanation in the fact that the '*last*' hired are the '*first*' in order of payment; but this is so trivial an advantage, if one at all, that the explanation must be dismissed. Moreover, the fact of the last hired being the first paid is evidently introduced for convenience-sake; if the first hired had been first paid, and, as would naturally follow, had then gone their way, they would not have seen that the others obtained the same penny as themselves, and so would have had no temptation to express their discontent. Neander³⁵ so entirely despairs of reconciling the parable with the words which introduce and finish it, that he proposes a desperate remedy, and one under the frequent application of which we should lose all confidence in the trustworthiness of the Evangelical records. He thinks the sentences and the parable to have been spoken on different occasions, and only by accident to have been here brought into connexion; and asserts that one must wholly pervert this weighty parable, to bring it through forced artifices into harmony with words which are alien to it. But if what has been observed above be correct, the saying is not merely in its place here, but is absolutely necessary to complete the moral, to express that which the parable did not, and, according to the order of human affairs, could not express,--namely, the *entire* forfeiture which would follow on the indulgence of such a temper as they displayed by the murmurers here.

There is more difficulty in the closing words, '*for many be called, but few chosen.*'³⁶ They are not hard in themselves, but hard in the position which they occupy. The connexion is easy and the application obvious, when they occur as the moral of the Marriage of the King's Son (Matt. 22:14); but here they have much perplexed those who will not admit entire rejection from the heavenly kingdom of those whom the murmuring labourers represent. Some explain, 'Many are called, but few have the peculiar favour shown to them, that, though their labour is so much less, their reward should be equal;' thus Olshausen, who makes the '*called*' and the '*chosen*' alike partakers of final salvation, but assumes that by these terms are signified lower and higher standings of men in the kingdom of heaven³⁷ (cf. Rev. 17:14). These last hired had, in his view, laboured more

³⁵ *Leben Jesu*, p. 196, note.

³⁶ It is not often that there is so felicitous an equivalent proverb in another language as that which the Greek supplies here; and which Clement of Alexandria has more than once adduced on the score of its aptness as a parallel:

Πολλοί τοι ναρθηκοφόροι, παυροί δέ τε βάκχοι.
'Many wear Bacchus's badge, but few are his.'

³⁷ Thus Wolf also (*Curæ*, in loc.): 'The "called" and "chosen" here must not be considered as opposed to each other in kind, but as opposed in degree of

abundantly, but this their more abundant labour was to be referred to a divine election, so that the name '*chosen*' or elect well becomes them to whom such especial grace was given. But this assumption of larger labour upon their part mars and defeats the whole parable, and cannot for a moment be admitted. Others understand by the '*called*' some not expressly mentioned, who had refused altogether to work; in comparison with whom the '*chosen*,' those who at any hour had accepted the invitation, were so few, that the Lord could not bear that any of these should be shut out from his full reward. But the simplest interpretation seems to be: Many are called to work in God's vineyard, but few retain that humility, that entire submission to the righteousness of God, that utter abnegation of any claim as of right on their own part, which will allow them in the end to be partakers of his reward.³⁸

happiness and dignity.'

38 The term *reward*, to express the felicity which God will impart to his people, sometimes offends, seeming to bring back to a legal standing point, and to imply a claim, as of right, and not merely of grace, upon their part. But being of a scriptural term (Matt. 5:12, 6:1; Luke 6:35; 2 John 8; Rev. 22:12), there is no reason why we should shrink, and our Church has not shrunk, from its use; for we pray 'that we, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of Thee be plenteously *rewarded*.' Only let us understand what we mean by it. Aquinas says: 'A man may have some merit in God's sight, not, indeed, according to an unconditional relation of justice, but according to a certain presupposition of a divine ordinance;' and this is a satisfactory distinction. The reward *has* relation to the work, but this, as the early protesters against the papal doctrines of merits expressed it, according to a *justitia promissionis divinæ*, not a *justitia retributionis*. There is no *meritum condignum*, though Bellarmine sought to extort such from this very parable (see Gerhard, *Loc. Theol.* loc. xviii. 8, 114). When it is said, 'God is *not unrighteous* to forget your work and labour of love,' it is only saying, 'He is faithful,' or promise-keeping (οὐκ ἀδίκος = πιστός: cf. 1 John 1:9; 1 Cor. 10:13; 1 Pet. 4:19). Augustine (*Serm.* cx. 4): 'Not by owing, but by promising, did God make Himself a debtor.' In the reward there is a certain retrospect to the work done, but no proportion between them, except such as may have been established by the free appointment of the Giver, and the only claim is upon his promise. It is, as Fuller says (*Holy State*, iii. 25), 'a reward in respect of his promise; a gift, in respect of thy worthlessness; and yet the less thou lookest on it, the surer thou shalt find it, if labouring with thyself to serve God for Himself, in respect of whom even heaven itself is but a sinister end;' for, in the words of St. Bernard: 'True charity seeks no reward, though a reward may follow it.' 'He is faithful that promised'--this, and nothing else, must remain always the ground of all expectations; and what these expectations are to be, and what they are not to be, this parable declares.--This subject of reward is well discussed in the *Supplement* to Herzog's *Real Encyclopädie*, s.v. Lohn.