

## Parables Session 11

### Introductory Comments

1. Despite the fact that this parable has multiple characters, settings, and elements, its traditional title is “the Laborers in the Vineyard.” Like most titles, this focuses us on one aspect of the parable and deemphasizes others. It’s all about the workers and the location. It encourages interpreters to associate with the laborers and not the landowner; which in turn allows the easy allegory that the landowner is God. And once allegory enters, the real world is left behind, as well as any concern the parable (and Jesus) might have for issues of economics, employment, and the relationship between managers and employees.
2. The emphasis on the vineyard is another move toward allegory (and away from real world considerations) as a vineyard is a well-established metaphor for God’s property (i.e. Isaiah 5:7; Jeremiah 12:10). But what happens if we change the title? Some scholars have suggested other (often humorous) options that emphasize the economic aspects of the parable: “The Conscientious Boss,” “The Last Hired Are the First Paid,” “How to Prevent the Peasants from Unionizing,” “Debating a Fair Wage,” “How to Make Some Like You, and Some Hate You.”
3. A traditional interpretation (from the early Church Fathers) of this parable goes like this: The householder is God, a figure of extraordinary forgiveness and grace. The first called was Adam, then subsequently Noah, Abraham, Moses, and finally Jesus and the gentiles. And the reward is salvation. This interpretation sows seeds of Christian supersessionism, since the early Church viewed the ones hired as indicating a progression in salvation history, from lack of law in Eden, to the Mosaic Law, to gospel. Another common interpretation is that the first hired represent the grumbling Jews (or at least their Pharisaic representatives) who sought to be judged by their works and their toil under the demanding yoke of the Law. The last hired are the tax collectors and the fishermen, without any prolonged period of rehabilitation, who were brought into the full assurance of God’s merciful forgiveness. In this light, the parable is a corrective for the Pharisee’s legalistic understanding of life in the kingdom, and a move toward God’s grace. There are several other common interpretations, all of which manage to do one thing: Jews are depicted as a negative foil. The traditional reading somehow finds a parable proclaiming a message of radical inclusivity, Jewish xenophobia, and Jesus’ “invention” of divine generosity.
4. Another more modern interpretation sees the parable as helping impoverished workers recognize how the householder is both exploiting them and preventing them from uniting to protest his unfair practices. Now politically aware, they find, in the householder’s insistence that the last hired be the first paid and in his paying all the workers the same amount, the abusive capitalist who sows discontent among the workers and so prevents them from unionizing. The parable then becomes a revelation to the workers, who now sense their own manipulation. While this is a creative rendering, it’s hard to say that first century Jews would have heard this message (though labor issues were common).
5. For our purposes, we will ask different questions of this parable. What if it was not about the allegory of “getting into heaven?” What if it was not so much about landowners exploiting workers or workers facing extreme poverty, but more about how to deal with labor relations in regular, generally prosperous times (of which the time of Jesus saw a good amount)? What if we saw it as about what God would have us do not to earn salvation, but to love our neighbor?

### Questions

Read *Matthew 20:1-16*, “*The Laborers in the Vineyard*”

- 1. What do the householder's multiple returns to the market communicate to us as readers? What about the ongoing presence of the workers?** Household managers usually know how much labor they need; the same is true with landowners. That our householder returns to the market over and over again suggests that either he is clueless about the number of workers he needs, that he has an insufficient number of workers although he has hired everyone available, or that he has another agenda. The last possibility is most likely; what that agenda is, however, remains as yet a mystery.

The householder continues to go to the market, but the parable makes no explicit mention of the *need* for more labor. Unclear as well is why these other individuals are in the marketplace, but not hired. We don't know if they've been there since dawn, but were simply not chosen, or if they arrived later. They may have already had another job. Perhaps they were sons and daughters taking care of aging parents or little children. Perhaps they had come from a neighboring village where employment was lacking. Commentators often suggest that the last hired were the old and the infirm, but there is nothing in the parable that suggests this. The question of the householder insinuates that the workers were capable physical performers.

- 2. What is your reaction to the way the householder pays the workers?** Today, for a number of commentators, the householder's instructions regarding payment make him both "unjust and arrogant" and render the situation "now not only one of exploitation but also of arbitrariness and injustice." Or the householder is seen as taking from the poor to give to the poor, and so is not displaying any compassion. If we identify with the first hired, we may well agree with these condemnatory interpretations. Our sympathies may well be with those who worked harder than the more recently hired. We may even conclude that in setting up the first hired to resent their coworkers, the householder has engaged in an early form of union busting!
- 3. What is it that the first ones hired want?** The narrator tells us that the workers expected to be paid more; their initial concern is the money gained. Their complaint shifts the focus. Now they are distressed because the last hired "have been made equal" to them. For some commentators, their question can be rephrased: "What is the point of hard work, of going early to the street corner where day laborers must wait to be hired, of diligence and perseverance, if all of this does not serve to distinguish us from those who are lazy and shiftless?" Yet there is no indication that the last hired were any more or less lazy and shiftless than the first hired. The first hired did not want to be treated equally to the last; they wanted to be treated better. It is the commentators who provide the last hired with the negative characteristics.
- 4. Who is in the right?** According to the parable, the householder. The first hired were not treated unfairly. They "agreed" to the going rate, and the Greek indicates that the householder claims to have treated the workers "justly." It is not the householder, but the workers, who have broken their own sense of community. The householder treated them equally, and the first-hired resented it.
- 5. Leaving allegory aside, what is the message(s) of the parable?** The householder not only fulfilled his contract with those he first hired; he also paid a full wage to those who might not have expected it. With these two moves, he proved himself sufficiently clever as to foreclose (in the honor/shame, patron/client system) any harm to himself. The only point that the workers could make about him was that he was generous to others. And in making that point, the workers learned their own economic lesson: *the point is not that those who have "get more," but that those who have not "get enough."* One does the work – in the labor force, in the kingdom – not for more reward, but for the benefit of all. The next day, perhaps the first will be last, and those who grumble in the evening about bonuses will be desperate in the morning for any job at all.

The parable encourages householders to support laborers, all of them. More than just aiding those at the doorstep, those who have should seek out those who need. If the householder can afford it, he should continue to put others on the payroll, pay them a living wage (even if they cannot put in a full day's work), and so allow them to feed their families while keeping their dignity intact. The point is practical, it is edgy, and it's a greater challenge to the church then and today than the entirely unsurprising idea that God's concern is *that* we enter, not *when*.

Not only to householder and laborer need each other, the work of some laborers benefits the lives of others. In the end, all have enough to eat, and the rich recognize their responsibility to those who are less well off, a responsibility that includes not simply giving a handout, but hiring "workers" who can thus preserve their dignity. If we refocus the parable away from "who gets into heaven" and toward "who gets a day's wage," we can find a message that challenges rather than prompts complacency. If we look at economics, at the pressing reality that people need jobs and others have excess funds, we find what should be a compelling challenge to any hearer. And in that story, we learn what it means to act as God acts, with generosity to all. And that is what parables are supposed to do.

*\*\*\*For next session, read Luke 18:1-8, "The Widow and the Judge"*

*And then there is the last Parable class:  
Session 13: The Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31*