

Introductory

This material is unique to Matthew. It is generally referred to as the *Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard*, which turns out to be something of a misnomer. The main character in the parable is the householder, not the workers, and it should be called the *Parable of the Generous Employer*, which others besides me have started to do.

This text is appointed to be read on Septuagesima Sunday in the TLH one-year lectionary and on Pentecost 18A in the three-year LW lectionary. The focus Jesus gives us, on the householder, will make your sermon more Gospel-oriented and less Law-oriented. Much preaching turns this and other Gospel parables into Law.

Helmut Thielicke talks about that phenomenon in *The Waiting Father*, and yet he calls this *The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard*. Last week Jesus made it about the forgiving king, and the focus this week is on the householder, and the other characters in both stories, like the laborers this week, have only supporting roles.

We see in the householder a man who is very generous, giving to workers in his vineyard, and giving to them more than they deserve, and that's the way that God treats us. The similar phrases "the first will be last and the last first" and "the last will be first," bookend the story; the first is at the beginning, the second at the end of it

We have been looking at a lot of parables lately, and we will be looking at more in the weeks to come. If you haven't already, you may want to talk about some of the basics of parables, and if you haven't done that for a while it may be a good time to review those basics. Keep reviewing the basics and add new material to the basics.

Between last week and this week, Jesus has left Galilee and gone to Judea (19:2). The usual large crowds are following Him, and He is doing His usual healing. The first encounter recorded by Matthew upon arrival is one instigated by the Pharisees, who try to draw Jesus into the thorny question of what would be a "just cause" for divorce.

As is the case today, the just cause for divorce was a hot-button issue, with a wide diversity of thought among theologians. Jesus refuses to be drawn into their discussion and simply tells them not to do it, which prohibition has the same effect on the disciples of His day as on Christians today; it makes them uncomfortable.

After that, children are brought to Jesus and the disciples try to send them away, but Jesus prevents that and blesses the children. Then follows the encounter with the one generally known by the moniker "Rich Young Ruler," who thinks very highly of himself, and who is not willing to let go of his riches to become a follower of Jesus.

Following that incident, Jesus directs His comments to the disciples, using the "eye of a needle" idiom to tell them how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom, but assuring them that God can do even that and other "impossible" things. It is in this context that Peter, a presumably successful entrepreneur, asks what he asks Jesus.

Peter had in fact left behind everything, including his seafood business, to follow Jesus, and he therefore stands in stark contrast to the Rich Young Rule. Peter asks Jesus not so much what's in it for him, but “τί ἄρα ἔσται ἡμῖν – what then will be of us?” The gist of the question would be something like, “what will become of us?”

Good question, and Jesus does not call him "Satan" or seem even cross that he asked it. Jesus tells him that in this life there is not much for him, at least in terms of earthly wealth, but that he will more than make up for it in the next life, where there is quite a bit in it for him, riches and eternal life. And then He tells this parable.

Textual Notes

1. Jesus begins with the words often used to introduce a parable, saying "Ὁμοία γάρ ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ – The Kingdom of the Heavens is like a man..." The man is further identified as “οἰκοδεσπότη – master of the house.” That word does not occur very often in the NT, and a word study wouldn't take very long.

To better understand the meaning of the word, Americans may have to travel through time and space to a different time and a different place. Lead your hearers on that journey so that they better understand the householder, the main character in this story. He was like what would have been called the Lord of the Manor in England.

America is the first country where truly anybody can truly become anything and is still the place where "rags to riches" lives come easiest and are the most common. We do not have nobility, and titles of nobility are forbidden by the U.S. Constitution. In that regard, as in a lot of other regards, what we are doing here in this country is new.

For most of human history, including in our own western culture, one is either born to nobility, or not. Such was the case with the Jews in the time of Jesus, who had their own class system which included those who were born into nobility, or not. The most important thing about being nobility is owning land, from which all else comes.

As the French Physiocrats will articulate eighteen centuries after Him, in the time of Jesus all wealth derived from the land, and nobility owned land, and the householder was one of those men. He had land, he had other assets, he had an education, he had political as well as economic power (those two always go hand in hand) and stature.

England was not the only place where manors and Lords could be found. Under the feudal system, which lasted well into the nineteenth century in much of Europe and into the twentieth in some, The Lord of the Manor lived in the Manor House and had absolute control of the land and the people who lived there. In England, he still does.

What the Lord wanted to happen on the manor happened, and all who were a part of the manor were beholden to him. For his part, the Lord was responsible for looking out for the good of his tenants. He was responsible for stewarding the manor and all who lived there, and if you lived on a manor with a good Lord, life could be good.

But if you lived on a manor with a bad Lord, things could get pretty tough. The next closest thing that I can think of to the Jewish "οἰκοδεσπότη," is the American farmer. While not all farmers own their own land, the ones who do own their own land often own great chunks of it, it's very valuable, and many of them are wealthy landowners.

I have mentioned before the farmer who, when asked, once told me that one of the things he likes about being a farmer - and he was a wealthy landowner - is that he tells people what to do, and they don't tell him what to do. So was the case with this "οικοδεσπότη." He told people what to do, and they did it without question.

It was once more common for Midwestern American farmers, and is still common farmers in California, to hire day laborers during harvest time. The "οικοδεσπότη," in this parable would have commonly hired day laborers, especially at harvest. The man in the parable owned a vineyard, and it was time to get to harvesting the grapes.

He needed hands and would pay for them. The man went out "ἅμα πρωὶ - along with the morning" to hire workers. Of that term Robertson says that it is a "classic idiom" meaning "at the same time with early dawn, break of day, country fashion for starting to work." Work begins at the crack of dawn, and that will come into play later on.

For most of the history of Western Civilization, we were an agricultural people whose workday was governed by the sun. When the sun came up, and you could see, you started working, and you stopped when the sun went down, and you could not see. With the coming of the Industrial Revolution came artificial lighting and clocks.

2. The householder goes to the place where the workers who want to work are gathered. Find a place like that around you where people who want to work go to find work. This is a union town, and union members can go to the union hall to be paired up with jobs. I see a lot of unskilled people using social media to find unskilled jobs.

The men in this story are not skilled artisans. They are the seasonal crews who come to help with the harvest, mostly in California. Having "συμφωνήσας δὲ μετὰ τῶν ἐργατῶν – agreed with the workers" that they should work for one denarius, the Lord then "ἀπέστειλεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα αὐτοῦ - sent them into his vineyard."

The denarius was the going rate for unskilled labor, and around here probably between two and three hundred dollars. The first verb, "agreed," which occurs five other times in the NT, indicates unity of amount and has very strong connotations of the two parties being in complete agreement with no disagreement about pay.

That agreement stands in stark contrast to the disagreement over their wages, which will come later. The second verb, "sent," is the same word used when Jesus sends out Apostles. Given the apparent angst of the Twelve about Paul – at least according to Paul – one cannot help but think of that connection in the hearing of this parable.

3 – 5. I would not spend a lot of time on these verses. The householder goes at 9:00 a.m., at noon, and at 3:00 p.m. to hire workers for the vineyard. Your hearers are familiar with the story, and the concept is not a difficult one; some of them worked all day, some of them worked part of the day, and some of them for only one hour.

In verse four, we hear the householder telling the workers that he will pay them "ὃ ἐὰν ᾗ δίκαιον δώσω ὑμῖν – whatever should be right (just) to you." The adjective "δίκαιος – right" is the word generally translated in the NT as "righteous" or "just" in the context of salvation. It's how a good employer should deal with people.

In the OT, the Hebrew equivalent "קִדְּקִי" is often associated with fairness in business dealings, like here. The promise from the householder is to deal with them justly in

this business matter. This same arrangement is included in the "ἐποίησεν ὡσαύτως – in the same manner" of verse five, spoken of those hired in the sixth and ninth hours.

The adjective “ἀργούς – idle” occurs a total of eight other times in the NT, and two of the occurrences are used in this parable to describe the would-be workers who are standing passively waiting for somebody to actively employ them. These men are not contributing anything to society, their inactivity may actually be drain on it.

6. Nothing to see, so far, but “περὶ δὲ τὴν ἑνδεκάτην – the eleventh hour – 5:00,” things get interesting. The Master, “ἐξελθὼν εὑρεν ἄλλους ἐστῶτα – going out found others standing,” ready and able, but not working, “καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς Τί ὧδε ἐστήκατε ὅλην τὴν ἡμέραν ἀργοί – and He said to them, ‘why do you stand here all day idle?’”

The translations which say that He "found" other men not working are not wrong, but they are unclear. In the American language, when it says that the man "found" other idlers, the meaning could be that he sort of passively happened upon them, or less likely it could be understood that the man actively went out looking for other idlers.

The meaning in the Greek is not unclear. It says the man "ἐξελθὼν εὑρεν ἄλλους – going out found others.” Both verbs are in the active voice; the man went looking for them. This may mean that they were not in the usual place where men went to look for labor, or it may simply mean that the landowner went to that place to find them.

Whichever is the case is not really important because the story is not about the laborers. The story is about the landowner, who now asks the men why they are standing around idle while the harvest is going on. If you’ve ever been around a harvest, then you know that during harvest time, there’s always work to be done.

7. Their response is simple, direct, and very easily understood, “λέγουσιν αὐτῷ Ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἡμᾶς ἐμισθώσατο – saying to Him, ‘because nobody hired us.’” It's not that they didn't *want* to work, or so they say. It's just that nobody has hired them to work, so far, or so they say. I suppose I should take them at their word; they want to work.

Using a present imperative, “λέγει αὐτοῖς Ὑπάγετε καὶ ὑμεῖς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα – He says to them, ‘you go into the vineyard, too.’” Some manuscripts add “καὶ ὃ ἐὰν ᾗ δίκαιον λήψεσθε – and whatever is right, you will receive.” A quick perusal of the apparatus shows that it was probably a later addition, and as usual changes nothing.

Not everybody thinks these men really wanted to work. Nine years ago, I was one of them. That is and always has been a segment of any labor force. They are the workers who really don't want to work, but who pretend to want to work. That might explain the indignation of the other workers towards them when payroll is issued.

8. Then it got dark, and they couldn't see, “ὥσας δὲ γενομένης λέγει ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος τῷ ἐπιτρόπῳ αὐτοῦ Κάλεσον τοὺς ἐργάτας – when evening arrives, the Lord says to His foreman, ‘call the workers.’” The KJV calls the man a “steward,” the right word for that time. The modern use “foreman,” the right word for this time.

He instructs him, “καὶ ἀπόδος τὸν μισθόν, ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῶν ἐσχάτων ἕως τῶν πρώτων - and pay them the wage, having begun from the last to the first.” The word for wage is singular “the wage”, not plural, “wages,” which distinction is rather an integral part of the story; the workers all equally received one and the same wage.

Payment is customarily made at the end of the day. What is *not* customary is that the workers who were hired last should be paid first. But that was not what bothered the first-hired, and they did not protest it. Nor did they protest when they saw that the men who had been hired last and who had worked only one hour, got paid a denarius.

10. What *did* bother the first-hired was that, when it came around to their turn to get paid, they were paid the same, “καὶ ἐλθόντες οἱ πρῶτοι ἐνόμισαν ὅτι πλεῖον λήμψονται – and coming, the first thought that they would receive more.” The verb “νομίζω – to think” means they were assuming that there was customary precedent.

The expectations of these first hired workers about to be paid is “νομίζω,” and it's variously translated here with words like “expected” or “thought” or “assumed” or “supposed.” The root is the word for “law,” and these men are in their minds thinking of what we might call something like “customary” or even “common law.”

Not this time, “καὶ ἔλαβον τὸ ἀνὰ δηνάριον καὶ αὐτοί – but they each also received a denarius themselves.” They got paid the same as the rest. They did not get paid more than the denarius; the amount paid to the last-hired. More importantly it was the amount that had been promised and agreed on when they had taken on the work.

11. Against their expectations, they did not receive more, but the same, and “λαβόντες δὲ ἐγόγγυζον κατὰ τοῦ οἰκοδεσπότου – having received they began to complain against the lord.” The second verb “γογγύζω – to murmur” Imperfect – they kept it up. The word occurs seven other times in the NT never in a positive way.

In their minds, it was not only reasonable and right that they should be paid more because they did more, and the last-hired should be paid less because they did less, or at least worked fewer hours. So they complain, and it was not just the typical run-of-the-mill grumbling that is part and parcel of any gathering of the working man.

The object of their complaining is specifically identified by Jesus as “οἰκοδεσπότου – the householder,” the man who had given them work that day and had just paid them what he had agreed to pay them for the day, what they had agreed to work for that day. They are playing the “it isn’t fair” card, but they haven’t a leg to stand on.

12. Jesus, who is telling the story, tells us what they were saying, and if the first-hired had been talking about the householder behind his back, now they get right up in his face, making use of the second person singular pronoun (you), which is the exact part of speech used when somebody is attacking somebody, and they are attacking Him.

The complaint is “Οὗτοι οἱ ἔσχατοι μίαν ὥραν ἐποίησαν, καὶ ἴσους αὐτοὺς ἡμῖν ἐποίησας – these the last have worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us,” and besides that, they had sweated more, “τοῖς βαστάσασι τὸ βάρος τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ τὸν καύσωνα – having borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

13. The householder does not dispute that they had worked hard, and he recognizes the thinly veiled accusation. He speaks not to all of them but to one of them, calling the man, “Ἐταῖρε, οὐκ ἀδικῶ σε – friend, I did not wrong you.” The normal word for “friend” is “φίλος.” The word used here is not that, but “Ἐταῖρε – supposed friend.”

It’s a rare word – three NT occurrences – that carries with it surprise that those words just came out of that person’s mouth, in this case the mouth of the worker. He is

genuinely surprised, and responds with a question expecting an affirmative answer, “οὐχὶ δηναρίου συνεφώνησάς μοι – Did you not agree with me for a denarius?”

14. He then tells the man, in no uncertain terms to do two things; “ἄρῃ τὸ σὸν καὶ ὑπάγε – take what is yours and go.” The first command is in the aorist tense, one-time simple act, focus on the act, and the second is in the present tense, ongoing action with focus on the person. Of those tenses and the imperative mood, FGG says:

The first verb form, "take" in the aorist tense, is the "normal form ... fully 72 percent of all New Testament specified case imperatives are 'aorist.' " while "'Present' forms are *abnormal* ... usually focusing upon some special connection between doer and the action to be done," and in this case the command to "go" (present tense) is "emphatic ... and insistent" (FGG 219).

Then He tells the worker, “θέλω δὲ τούτῳ - I want to do this.” By saying that, the Householder turns the focus to Himself, reminding the worker that it’s not about him, it’s about Him. It’s a matter of who is in charge here, who controls the money, and what He desires to happen, not about what the worker desires or expects to happen.

While most Americans, who regularly and often deliberately treat their "betters" with disrespect, then brag about it, would not see a problem with their attitude, and the idea that the day laborer would be even having this conversation with the householder would have been almost unthinkable to the hearers in the day of Jesus.

15. Then comes another rhetorical question, another affirmative answer expected, “οὐκ ἔξεστίν μοι ὃ θέλω ποιῆσαι ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς – can’t I do what I want with my things?” He can do what He wants with His things! Then He asks, “ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρός ἐστιν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀγαθός εἰμι – is your eye evil because I am good?”

It’s a legitimate question, expecting neither an affirmative nor a negative response, and it gets to the heart of the matter; the real problem is the green-eyed monster. A.T. Robertson (actually, Lightfoot as quoted by Robertson) has a short discussion about the difference between δίκαιον (righteous) and ἀγαθός (good).

As between *dikaïos*, righteous, and *agathos*, good, Lightfoot notes 'all the difference in the world' which he shows by quotations from Plato and Christian writers, a difference of sympathy mainly, the *dikaïos* man being 'absolutely without sympathy' while the *agathos* man 'is beneficent and kind'" (WP - *Epistles of Paul*, p. 356, commentary on Romans 5:7).*

The householder is both righteous and good, but it is not the righteousness, but that he is "absolutely without sympathy," that causes the other man to be jealous: It is the *goodness* of the householder, that he gave to the last-hired what he did not *have to* give to him, an act that shows the householder to be "beneficent and kind,"

16. He concludes with a short explanation of the story, noting that, “Οὕτως ἔσονται οἱ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι καὶ οἱ πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι – in the same manner, the last will be first and the first last.” That phrase, as well as the similar phrase at the beginning of the story, are both Chiasmus, more specifically a type of Chiasmus called Antimetabole.

It is “a verbal pattern in which the second half of an expression is balanced against

the first but with the words in reverse grammatical order.” For example:

“Stops static before static stops you” – Bounce Fabric Softener Advert

“It is not how old you are, but how you are old” – Jules Renard

“Eat to live, do not live to eat” – Socrates (Attributed)

“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

The Internet says,

Christ himself taught in chiastic structures. Take the parable of the workers recruited for a penny a day recorded in Matthew 20. The parable is bounded by the classic chiasm – **“the first shall be last, and the last first”** (19:30) which is repeated at the end of this parable but in reverse – **“the last shall be first, and the first last”** (20:16)! In between, the parable is a dramatised chiasm – the first labourers are called up last, and vice versa. This clearly demonstrates that chiasm is a conscious technique in the mind of Christ for teaching disciples.

Besides this, the most well-known chiasm of Jesus is Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” Those are all relatively simple Chiasm, but it can be more complex, as complex as you want to make it, like in John 4, “

A (23a) But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: B (23b) for the Father seeks such to worship him. A' (24c) must worship him in spirit and in truth.

“You have to know how to accept rejection and reject acceptance.” Ray Bradbury

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Everybody’s Father

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” Shakespeare, *MacBeth*

So what is the application of the parable? The parable teaches a general truth, as explained by the two chiasms, and it can be applied to Israel – who have been in the vineyard for a long time – and the Gentiles. Peter asks what he asks and is Peter the worker who went out first and many others – most notably Paul – after him.

Not just Peter, but the Twelve and all who come after them and the Seventy. The Rich Young Ruler, he looked to be “first,” but upon further examination, not so much. The Thief on the Cross certainly waited until the last minute. Most people in the pew will know of lifelong Christians and those who got in just under the wire.

* In *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, A.T. Robertson does not cite sources, which is just a little bit annoying. In this case, I could search Lightfoot until the cows come home for that reference and still not find it. Joseph Barber Lightfoot was an Anglican clergyman, bishop, and scholar who was dead before the career of Archibald Thomas Robertson, a Baptist American clergyman and scholar, had begun.

Almost certainly Robertson had access to Lightfoot's writings, the last of which was published in 1892, and I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of the quotation, but still, it would have been swell to have been able to look up some of those quotations from Plato and Christians. And the full text of WP is available absolutely free at www.ccel.org.

Law/Gospel

Last/First - One thing that preachers in our context should never forget is that we are speaking to listeners who are almost all "Gentile," in the sense of not being Jewish, by birth. Parables like this are to us pure Gospel, that we late-comers get the same reward as do the OT patriarchs and their wives and children, the same as the Prophets and the Apostles, and that reward is heaven, which is not earned.

Idler/Useful- Like the last men in the story, the Natural Man is a spiritual idler. Life for this man means spiritually idling away his days, hanging out on the spiritual street corners, making conversation with the other spiritual idlers, having no purpose in life. In Baptism, God has called us, who were also spiritual idlers, to be part of the group that understands that life is more than spiritual idleness. It is a life that ends up in heaven. NB: It is the householder, not the current workers, who goes out and finds the idlers. NBB: I have not said anything about a purpose-driven life.

Sermon Titles

First and Last in the Kingdom

Workers and Idlers

The Kindly Employer

The Parable of the Paycheck

Hymns

Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us - LSB 851

Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness - LSB 563

We Give Thee But Thine Own - LSB 781

Lord, 'Tis Not that I Did Choose Thee - LSB 573

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