

The Parables of Jesus

WEEK 3: LECTURE OUTLINE

THOSE UNGRATEFUL LABORERS (MATTHEW 20:1-16)

INTRODUCTION

- Get ready: this has the potential to be a parable that you won't like!
- A helpful exercise: take up a role or point of view in listening to the story.
 - As you read this parable, you are invited to take up the role of a worker hired early in the morning – and then consider what you think of this story.
- Read through the Parable (Matthew 20:1-16). Translations of the parable (NRSV, NABRE) are provided in a separate handout. Below is the RSV translation accompanying the lecture:

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. ⁵Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last.”

DIGGING DEEPER INTO “COMMON LIFE”

THE LIFE & PROSPECTS OF A DAILY LABORER

- We have a general idea of what their basic life was like.
 - A seasonal worker, owning no land, with no contractual relationship.
 - Not unlike migrant workers today – but work was even less of a guarantee.
 - Slaves could be regarded as “better off” than day-laborers.
- Working Prospects?
 - They might hope for 200 days of work a year.
 - The “going rate” for a day’s work is a “denarius” (approx. \$0.50 – 1.00 per hour).
 - This is “subsistence” level income: you can “make it” on this, provided other family members find supplemental income.
 - Some days you come home with \$12; other days you have nothing.

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THE WORK & CHARACTER OF THE “FOREMAN”

- The “householder” or “landowner” functions as a “foreman.”
- What does he do, according to the text?
 - He hires day-laborers at the beginning of the day for a 12-hour work day (6am to 6pm).
 - But he goes out *four more times* (at 9:00am, 12:00pm, 3:00pm & 5:00pm) to hire more laborers.
- What does this mean? What kind of foreman does this text portray?
 - Given that there is a surplus of labor, *he is keeping his costs down*.
 - Rather than hire every available laborer at the beginning, the foreman hires incrementally according to the work that remains as the day proceeds.
 - He can spend no more or less than he needs; he is a *frugal* foreman. He does his job and he does it well.

HE PARABOLIC PUMP-FAKE: HOW FRUGAL IS THE FOREMAN?

- Remember that the parables draw images from common life but present them so as to “tease the mind into active thought” (C. H. Dodd; lecture 1).
- The practice of the foreman (hiring incrementally during the day) seems savvy and frugal, but what happens next makes no sense!
 - He pays a one-hour worker (hired for one hour to save money) a *full-day’s wage!*
 - What would that mean for the *all-day* worker?
- How else could you tell the story?
 - The foreman could have shown generosity by paying the one-hour workers a denarius, and the rest proportionately.
 - The foreman could have paid the all-day workers first, and then shown generosity to the others by paying the same.
- But that’s not how the Parable goes:
 - The all-day laborers await their payment while those who worked even one hour get paid the same as though they worked an entire day.
 - If they expected to get more for their full-day’s work, they are about to be sorely disappointed.

THREE POINTED QUESTIONS

- The all-day laborers express their frustration, prompting three pointed questions from the “lord of the vineyard”:
 - “Did I not give you what I promised?” (v.13)
 - “Am I not permitted to do what I want with what belongs to me?” (v.15a)
 - “Or are you envious because I am generous?” (v.15b)

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- ♦ Literally, “Or is your eye evil because I am good?”
- ♦ Isn’t the real problem not my injustice, but your envy? Aren’t you begrudging the generosity shown to other people?
- The way the story is told tells us what the foreman actually did – and it’s not what we thought.
 - The “image from common life” tells us the foreman was a savvy businessman, that he was frugal, that he was cutting costs.
 - But what he was really doing was creating jobs – and jobs for the most undeserving.
 - When it looks like the foreman is cutting costs, he’s actually doing everything he can to be generous.
- The problem here is not with the foreman, but with *the perception of the workers*.

OUR “RESPECTABLE” SINS AND GOD’S GRACIOUSNESS

- This parable addresses us with our “most respectable sins” – like envy.
 - We do what we think we ought to do, and we expect to be rewarded accordingly.
 - When we see others who have not done as they ought to have done (as we have!), and yet God is still generous and loving toward them, we are envious.
- We can think of ourselves as “all-day laborers.”
 - We “deserve” everything that God “ought” to give us.
 - God becomes a heavenly quid-pro-quo: if we behave a certain way, we receive a certain outcome; and if our faithfulness and faithful behavior is not matched by an appropriate reward, we think that something’s gone wrong – that maybe God has failed us.
- But God is not our heavenly quid-pro-quo. God is our Father in heaven, who knows what is best for us.
- Our “respectable sins” will meet up with a sovereign and gracious God.
 - Will our “respectable sins” give way to God’s graciousness and his desire to bless the least deserving?
 - We will not understand God (and his generosity) as long as we think of him as a cost-cutting, quid-pro-quo God.
 - We will not understand God (and his generosity) until we recognize and accept that he causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust, and gives to all beyond what they deserve.
- God asks the foreman’s pointed questions of us, too. God draws us in and asks us if we will allow our own envy (or any other “respectable sins”) to give way to his generous purposes.
 - We should all consider ourselves in the position of the eleventh-hour workers, graciously invited to work and dwell in the vineyard.