

The Hire of the Labourers in the Vineyard.

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THE main purpose of this parable is, undoubtedly, to contrast the bargaining spirit of the world with the trustful service required by the gospel of the Christian. The labourers that enter the vineyard at sunrise make an *agreement* for a certain wage, while the others enter on their work in trust, that "whatsoever is right" they shall receive. And the scene at sundown is to show that, as the bargaining spirit is lower in principle, so also is it poorer in results. The reward assigned to those that have laboured only one cool hour, but laboured trustfully, is equal to the whole day's wage paid to those that had made their contract sure.

We have but one group of labourers to represent the bargaining spirit, but four to illustrate the spirit of trustful service. In its opening scenes the parable dwells on the calling of those who, at successive periods of the day, entered the vineyard late. We are carefully given to understand the exact length of time during which they wrought. When we come to the reckoning, however, in the end of the day, the three intermediate groups—all of the trustful order, let it be observed—almost disappear from the story. The labourers come in due order to receive their hire, but the parable concerns itself now with only the last and the first. But what of the others? Is their place in the parable meaningless? It must be shown that what is told us concerning them sharpens the grand contrast between the first and the last, and contributes essentially to the right understanding of the Master's procedure in the end.

"It may," says Trench, "be securely inferred that all between the last and the first received the penny as well."

Certainly this "inference" has been invariably drawn. Many are probably not aware that, at the best, it is nothing better than an inference, and will be surprised to find that the parable does not affirm this. We are at a loss to know on what grounds, as an inference, it rests. If we are told that an employer gives as much to a man that works one hour trustfully, as he pays to another that works a whole day by an agreement, we may surely infer that for three hours of trustful labour he will give three times as much. That all the labourers received the same remuneration is, in fact, not an inference, but an assumption. We hold that it ruins the symmetry of the parable, and in itself is neither reasonable nor right.

We shall endeavour to show clear grounds for inferring, on the contrary, that *the hire of the trustful labourers must be conceived of as rising according to the duration of their toil, and on the generous scale*

of remuneration instanced in the case of those that had laboured for only a single hour. The arithmetic is Simple Proportion. The Householder's estimate of the worth of labour is represented as twelve times higher than the standard fixed by the labour market. We do not, of course, attach any importance to this, except as belonging to the form of the story. (Compare Matt. xix. 29, "Shall receive an *hundredfold*.") The generosity of Heaven's estimate will far exceed any computation of ours. The inner truth of the parable is, that the least possible amount of work done trustfully will meet with as high a recompense as larger efforts made in a different spirit. But the right understanding of the structure of the parable, as our Lord relates it, is what concerns us now.

The view which thus far we have been stating, we now proceed to prove.

1. In the first place, *it is implied in the logic of the parable itself.* Of the four groups of workmen that entered the vineyard late, but trustfully, the last is selected as making the contrast the most striking, and because the parable had undertaken to deal with extreme cases (chap. xix. 30). It was not our Lord's purpose to institute any direct comparison between these different groups of trustful labourers. But the argument of the parable requires us to conceive of these eleventh-hour labourers as representing the principle of trustfulness when its claims are at their weakest; and this presupposes that the claims of the others are acknowledged to be greater. The underlying argument is *a fortiori*. The story asserts an equality of reward, not between the bargaining and the trustful, but between those that had made the most of their bargain, and those that could make least by their trustfulness. It does not commend a trustful spirit to say, or to imply, that the man who works nine hours is, after all, only on an equality with him that works for one. But it is a great commendation of faith, that he who labours trustfully for a single hour is as richly rewarded as the man that labours twelve, by the best agreement he can make. For happy are they that have wrought in faith for longer periods. How abundant in results must be a long day's trustful toil.

2. *With this view agrees also the context of the foregoing chapter.* The rich young man had come (chap. xix. 16) seeking to strike a bargain with Christ for Eternal Life. Then Peter's question, arising out of this incident (chap. xix. 27) displayed, on the surface of it at least, something of the same spirit; and Christ, recognising the better spirit of the man, assured His disciples (chap. xix. 29) that there were abundant and *proportionate* rewards in the king-

dom of heaven for all that had made any sacrifice for His name's sake. But He reproved the bargaining tone His ear had caught in Peter's question, by uttering the oracular words (chap. xix. 30), which the parable is further to explain: "But many shall be last that are first, and first that are last."

Trustful service in the parable manifestly corresponds to sacrifice "for my name's sake" in the context. Now when Christ says, "Shall receive an hundredfold" (or, as some read, "manifold"), He not only declares the largeness of his rewards, but He states that there is a proportion between the reward and the sacrifice. The parable, as commonly understood, has nothing to correspond to this. The penny, which the bargaining could claim, is a poor enough equivalent for the largeness of Christ's promise, but it is no equivalent at all as a proportionate recompense.

3. This interpretation, moreover, *gives an adequate account of the purpose served, in the parable, by the intermediate labourers.* The view commonly received makes no acknowledgment of the element of *time*, so prominently brought forward in connection with the calling of these men. It fails to mark wherein they differ from each other, or to justify the introduction of any intermediate labourers at all. These unhappy men — and most of them had borne the burden and heat of the day as well as their bargaining comrades — do spend their strength for nought and in vain. They crowd the vineyard, and cumber the parable, and create confusion in the reckoning. Why should we overlook the circumstance that the hour of entering the vineyard is so carefully noted in the case of each group of labourers? It seems reasonable to suppose that this fact has some bearing on the amount of hire to be paid. The Steward, at least, is likely to have considered it in this light. But if it entered into his calculations, it must also enter into ours. Surely it is plain that our Lord, at the outset of the story, is supplying us with *data* for estimating the hire of all the trustful labourers. In view of the information there supplied, it needed not that he should state explicitly the remuneration actually given, save in the case of the first and the last. This would have lessened the sharpness of the contrast in the end. The reckoning would have been needlessly protracted. The length of the service, rather than the trustfulness of it, would have appeared in the foreground. The amount of the remuneration would have withdrawn our attention from the generosity of the standard whereby it is ruled.

It is said concerning the bargaining labourers, that when they came to receive their hire "they supposed that they should have received more." On what grounds did they suppose so? Payment had begun with a penny in the case of the eleventh-hour men; and, according to the common view,

each successive group had been paid off with the same amount. There was nothing in this to justify any expectation of larger reward. On the contrary, there was a sufficiently wide experience to make this extremely improbable. But how easy to account for this supposition if the Householder's estimate of what is "right" be conceived of as an ascending grade of recompense through all the intermediate groups. We can well imagine how expectation rose. Wages were increasing rapidly. Starting with a sum equal to a whole day's wage for a single hour they had reached, in the case of the third-hour labourers, an amount nine times as large; when suddenly, in the case of the bargainers, payment falls to the penny with which it began. Disappointment breaks out in murmuring in presence of the Steward; but the murmuring is wholly confined to the first or bargaining group, although others, too, had "borne the heat of the day." It reaches the lord of the vineyard as an open complaint wholly directed against the last. "These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made *them equal unto us.*" In the Householder's reply, the main contrast of the parable again sweeps into view: "Friend, didst not thou *agree* with me for a penny?" And it is still, as between the first and the last, that the remuneration is affirmed to be equal: "I will give unto this last even as unto thee."

4. Our argument is, perhaps, at its strongest, in *indicating the character of the lord of the vineyard.*

It is not to be denied that most persons in reading this parable, as it is commonly understood, have a certain vague feeling that there is something in it to which they do not easily reconcile themselves. They hardly know, perhaps, what it is that offends them, or where it lies. The lord of the vineyard does more than fulfil his bargain; but there is a haughtiness in the tone of his voice, as he claims to "do what he will with his own." His words may silence, but they do not satisfy. The reflection that, in the spiritual sphere, Heaven's ways are not as our ways, fails to reassure us; for we know that they are better. That all should receive the same remuneration is disappointing; and we can only hope that, as these men dealt trustfully with their employer, so they may afterwards deal honourably with each other. We are glad the one-hour labourers were so bountifully rewarded. We do not sympathise with the murmuring of those that had wrought all day. But the conviction keeps recurring, that there is a want of fair dealing somewhere; and, with this conviction in our mind, we are fain to conclude that the complainers, although acting ungracefully and foolishly, had morally the best of the argument. It does not surprise us that the Householder's goodness is evil spoken of. A gloomy arbitrariness casts a darkness over his benevolence, not penetrable by the light of any star.

The lord of the vineyard claims to have done the bargaining men "no wrong." And so far, the ordinary view may suffice to acquit him of injustice. But it will not acquit him of the far graver charge of wronging those that trusted him. For as these men, on entering the vineyard, were promised "whatsoever was right," so are they called at the evening time to receive their "hire." The trustful as well as the bargaining are to be paid for their *work*. As between the first and the last, it is undoubtedly just that the employer should deal with the one according to agreement, and with the other according to his own more generous estimate. But it is not consistent with justice, that the payment of those who all alike laboured trustfully should be irrespective of the amount of their toil. Their trustfulness gives them the advantage of the Householder's more liberal standard; but their labour entitles them still to its proportionate value.

By setting the conduct of the Householder in the clear light of principle, our view vindicates his *justice* (ver. 4). Enough has been said to show in how high a degree it enhances his *generosity*. It abundantly justifies his claim to be acknowledged "good" (ver. 15).

5. Lastly. *This view vindicates the consistency of Christ's Teaching.* That all shall receive according to their works is everywhere declared to be the principle whereby the awards of Christian service shall be ruled. Why should we, by a quite gratuitous assumption, make this principle to appear in distorted shape in a parable that treats of this very theme?

The inference, that it matters not when we begin to work for God, lies so obviously on the surface of the view, that assigns to all labourers an equal recompense, that all expositors find it needful to discredit so fatal an idea. But to show that it is false in the spiritual sphere is not enough to defend the parable, unless it can be shown to be unreasonable as an inference. Now, on the common view, it is not unreasonable. We must deny the assumption on which it rests. He who spoke the parable has Himself provided against so ruinous an inference. For the story, as we have read it anew, not only affords no ground for this

idea, but indicates how very greatly the reckoning will be affected by delaying to enter on the service of our Lord.

The parable thus presents, in beautiful harmony, the working of man and the generosity of God. Here is a Pisgah height, whence we may behold, in one far-reaching prospect, the fair heritage of grace, and the rewards of human effort. The goodness of the lord of the vineyard blends with the worth of the labourer's faithful toil. The teaching of Paul and the teaching of James meet in the parable of Christ.

If it be asked how it comes to pass that the recompense of these labourers has always been assumed to be, in every case, the same, we reply that this idea is a remnant from an older view concerning the main purpose of the parable. Time was when the chief lesson of the parable was supposed to be stamped on the penny. The penny was Salvation, and the bearing of the parable was to show that as the chief of sinners might be saved, so the holiest and the best could not be more than saved. In this interpretation, it was, of course, inevitable that the recompense should be held to be the same for all. This view survives also in the application that is sometimes made of the thought of the "Eleventh Hour." There is no need to show how foreign this view is to the spirit of both the parable and the context. It never arose from the exposition of Scripture; it was a doctrinal key believed to fit every lock, and very confidently applied to this. The doctrine may be true, but as an exposition of the parable it has long been set aside. Our Lord is speaking not about Salvation, but about Service; not about entering into peace with God, but about entering into work; and about the spirit that brings work into relation to the exceeding generosity of heaven.

The more careful Exegesis of modern times has placed the penny in a quite subordinate place. It lays stress on the contrast between the bargaining of the first and the faith of the last. But the "equal penny," received by tradition from our fathers, has hitherto obscured the generosity of the Householder, and the truth and the beauty of the parable.

The Religious Literature of the Month.

BOOKS.

DR. STALKER has prepared a new edition of his *Life of Jesus Christ*, one of the Handbooks for Bible Classes and Private Students (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, crown 8vo, pp. 155, 1s. 6d.). We are thankful to see that he has not altered the text. A vivid picturesque style is the one thing

which never grows old or loses its charm. The notes have been carefully revised and brought up to date, the best literature which has appeared since its first issue being skillfully noted. This new edition should be got and placed beside the old. It is one of the few books of which we may afford to have two copies.