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## THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD: AN INTERPRETATION.

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Matthew 20 1-16.

Few parables of our Lord have been so hotly debated as this. It has been a veritable battle ground of exegesis. The most varied and contradictory doctrines have been deduced from it. For a certain order of mind it stands as the charter of the Divine Sovereignty stated in its most extreme form. "Is it not lawful to do as I will with my own"? The arbitrary rate of pay meted out to the various strata of workmen who toiled, some for twelve hours, and some for one only, was supposed, by our fathers, to be a fair representation of the method of God in dealing with mankind. The protest of certain of the workmen against an apparently high-handed proceeding, was regarded as an exhibition of wilful unbelief, without the least little of justification. The ethical sense of the present generation, happily, does not permit us to accept any view of God which places him in a light less real and just than that in which the highest type of man known to us could appear. We no longer believe that there is anything like

caprice in the Divine nature, the Eternal Ought governs God as surely as it governs the least of His children. God cannot do as He likes, in the children's sense of that phrase: He can only do what His own moral law binds Him to do. We can no longer therefore select an isolated sentence such as "Is it not lawful to do as I will with my own"? and build upon it a serious doctrine which is in antagonism alike to the whole sense of Holy Scripture and to our own highest ethical interests. It is the parable as a whole that must be considered and not any one portion of it.

For others the parable stands as a refutation of the doctrine of human merit and a justification of the doctrine of Divine Grace. All the labourers received a penny for their day's work, whether they entered the vineyard early or late. The penny, on this hypothesis, is understood to be eternal life, which no man can earn, but which is freely bestowed upon all men who come to God, irrespective of merit or character. Thus the person who enters the service of God at the eleventh hour, fares equally well with him who from the beginning of his life's day joyfully served God. The bearing of the burden and heat of the day counts for nothing. As a representation of the action of God towards His servants this is certainly encouraging. Not that any true servant of God is anxious about reward! Love never dreams of reward. It speaks with Xavier:

Sic amo et amabo Te  
Solum quia rex meus es  
Et solum quia Deus es.

Yet, love that is unappreciated or treated in the cold formal way of business soon bleeds and may bleed itself to death. At the end of our life's day we do not want God's "penny"; we want Himself. But if He coldly dispenses to all a like acknowledgment of our life's work why should we trouble to serve Him amidst discouragement and trouble to shoulder the burden of the day?

Nothing can more surely dull the enthusiasm of youth desiring to consecrate itself to the service of God than such a representation of the action of God towards His servants. Again, happily, our ethical sense saves us. When we shift the emphasis from the thought of reward for service to that of the effect of service upon character we enter a region in which such considerations as we have reviewed have no place. We attach new meanings to the old words about rulership over five or ten cities; to the 'abundant entrance' which some have, and to the salvation 'but as by fire' which others experience. There is and must be all the difference in the world between men who offer the whole of their powers to God throughout life, and those who surrender the last fragments of life at the eleventh hour.

Nor can we legitimately find any place in this parable for those economic principles which some of the disciples of Mr. Ruskin imagine are contained in it. "Let all masters treat their workmen as this householder treated his and there would be an end to disputes about wages. Pay all alike whether they do much or little." But can any serious thinker really entertain such bizarre proposals? For one thing, so far from ending disputes about wages, if we follow the hint of the parable we should see them multiply. For another, if the method adopted by this householder were universally followed, the whole world of business could not hold together for a single month. Imagine the head of a great firm announcing that he would pay his workmen a full week's wage whether they put in their whole time or simply the last hour of it. What then would become of production? And what of money itself? To state the case thus is to condemn it on the instant.

Such interpretations as these, which have been so common, may safely be set aside without pity. They do not even remotely approach the truth which our Lord sought to emphasize in this parable. Let us look, then, afresh at His words and seek for their soul.

The occasion of this remarkable utterance was the visit of the rich young ruler to Jesus. He was the great man of the region, devout, wealthy, exceptionally moral and in deadly earnest. Apparently he was anxious to join the band of the disciples. He was a most desirable person from every point of view. The majority of the disciples were plebeians. For an aristocrat like this to belong to them would surely be a great gain. He would attract others of his class and his money would be very useful to the cause. But Jesus was never over-anxious to gain disciples for the mere sake of a numerical display. He sifted all applicants and made His choice of the fit. And He tested this young ruler, who broke down under the test, and went away "sorrowful, for he had great possessions?" The departure of the ruler plainly annoyed the disciples, who had been watching the scene with keen interest. Almost angrily they exclaim, "Who then can be saved?"—if for such a man there is no place what chance is there for anybody? Meanwhile, Simon Peter was making capital of the incident. He argued, "If this man surrenders nothing it is reasonable that he should receive nothing; then, contrariwise, they who have renounced all should receive an immense recompense." And in a moment the words are upon his lips, "We have forsaken all and followed Thee: **what shall we have therefore?**" He wanted his religion to pay. Such capital as he had put into this business ought to bring in large interest. And Christ answered Peter in a very plain manner—"Whoever follows me (He said) shall receive full compensation. But, Peter, the spirit which your question manifests is so utterly material and selfish and so opposed to the spirit of My kingdom, that unless you renounce it you run a grave risk, not of gaining anything, but of losing all. You are the 'first' of the Apostolic band—I raised you to that rank a fortnight ago at Cesarea Philippi, after your great confession of My name—but the spirit you now manifest will drive

you down the lines until you become the very last. Listen, Peter, I will show you by means of a story how this deterioration may come to pass"—and then the Lord told the humbled and astonished disciple the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.

Now what was the real quest of this householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard? This: he wanted servants for an **entire season** of grape culture. This is an essential thing to grasp: indeed, it is **the** point upon which the parable turns. Men who, like the writer, have lived in countries where the vine is tended commercially will, better than others, understand the point here raised. The season lasts, from beginning to end, for several months; and if the vintage is to be successful, then the **same men** must attend to the work throughout the whole process, carrying on the enterprise from stage to stage. Imagine the state of any vineyard if its proprietor drafted into it a different set of workers every day, or who had to rely upon men who could work only in an intermittent way! No! this householder requires competent men whom he can trust to work, day after day, until the grape harvest is safely gathered in. And his problem is how to secure the best workmen—the worthy men. There are more men, of a kind, available than he requires. How shall he make his selection from the hundreds of men awaiting employment? He hits upon an entirely original plan, by means of which he can weed out the undesirables and retain for his service the best men. And his plan is this: at daybreak he repairs to the **souk** where are assembled the men awaiting hire. From their number he makes a certain selection and he "agrees" with them upon the rate of pay, which is that of their "union"—a "penny" per day. **Both sides are satisfied.** On neither side is there any sentiment: this hire for a penny is a pure matter of business, a bargain which is recognized at the outset as being fair. The first draft of men enters the vineyard in the early hours

of the day and forthwith commences to work. Three hours later, and again at noon and at three o'clock in the afternoon, he visits the **souk**, each time engaging fresh men. But with these he makes no definite bargain. He asks them to trust his honor—"Whatsoever is right I will give you." And believing in him they go forth to his work. A moral bond is created between master and men. These men who will work on such terms are morally superior to those who want a hard and fast bargain over the terms of payment. To pure business terms there is now added something beautifully human. . . .

The Syrian day is drawing to its close. It wants but one hour to sunset (the "eleventh hour") when the householder proceeds to put into execution the chief feature of the novel plan of choice. It is five o'clock, and all the men left over without employment have abandoned hope of finding work for that day. Suddenly the householder confronts them and, assuming a tone of harshness, says, "What do you mean loafing about all the day?" Stung by the seeming reproach, one of them answers sharply, "Because we have had no chance to work." "If that is so," replies the householder, "if it is really work that you want, then go out into my vineyard—there is work there." **It is his challenge to their sincerity.** If they are merely idlers who make a ready excuse about not being able to find employment, they will say, "What is the use of working for an hour and nothing at the end of it?" For the point of his challenge lies here, the householder said not a single word to this last group of men about compensation of any kind. (See Revised Version.) And they rise to his challenge nobly. They accept the offer of work without payment rather than remain unemployed. Now the householder has discovered what he sought: he has found two higher classes of workmen, those who are bound to him by the tie of honor, and those who serve because they hate idleness. And both classes are unselfish: they are not out to exploit him. They mean

to do full work, for the work's sake and for their master's. And such men as these he wants for his permanent service: men of character and of honor. . . .

The sun has set, the labourers have gathered for their payment, when, to the astonishment of all, the last comers—who are paid first—receive a full day's pay. When the first comers line up for payment they also receive like amount—the sum for which they bargained. Then it is that they reveal their real quality. In receiving their penny they have no cause for complaint. What angers them is the generosity of the master to others. It is evident then that these uncontented spirits will break out into rebellion upon the least provocation: they will not regard their bond. They have no living relation with their master: it is his money they are after. And such men no master cares to attach to himself: he is never sure of them. The householder has had them on trial for one day. They have failed and he now dismisses them. The others, who are bound to their master by a tie nobler than the financial one, **are engaged for the entire season.** The many are called, the few chosen. The householder's scheme has been completely successful: he has sifted out his servants and retained only the best. It was "thus" (*ὕτως*) in this way, the first became the last, the last first. So Jesus spake to the soul of Simon Peter and showed him how the "first" might become last because of a selfish spirit.

The lesson of the parable is an enduring one. It is spoken to disciples everywhere and at all times. In it Christ opens up the way to permanent service for the kingdom of God. This is the point to be noted: He desires permanent servants and not day labourers. He calls men and women into his vineyard to remain in it during the whole day of life. That for a reason which is very clear. All wise masters prefer "old hands" to perpetual changes in the staff. The temporary servant can only touch the surface of his master's work: it is the permanent servant,

the old and trusted servant, who is admitted into the master's secrets and who is fully identified with the master's work. "Shall I hide from Abraham the thing that I will do?" But this honor is not for all, simply because not all will submit themselves to the conditions upon which alone it can be bestowed. Too many of the disciples serve the master fitfully: when the mood is upon them, or under a strong impulse from without. These are not permanent servants: they cannot be depended upon **always**. Such people are always liable to become the last. They never enter into the **joy** of their Lord. The first trial day reveals the inner selfishness of their lives. The men who were rejected at the end of the trial day were the men who served for pay. Those who were retained had served for love and honor. They entered the vineyard because of their regard for the householder, who, until the eleventh hour, had made no sign that he wanted them. So, according to Jesus, one hour of loving service outweighs a whole day of self-seeking activities. For love alone can survive the shock of crisis and the strain of heavy tests. He who serves God for the sake of pay, of any sort, must in the end break down. Love alone is the elixir of life. And love is its own reward.