

Some Insights from the Parable of the Vineyard Labourers (Mt. 20:1-15)

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Abstract

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard comes from the context of a world wherein there was extreme poverty and exploitation of the masses and lack of work opportunities for ordinary citizens to make a decent living. The vineyard workers were victims of an exploitative socio-economic system. The gracious vineyard owner was an exception in the prevalent order in that he had not only provided work opportunities for the labourers without employment but also a wage unequal to their job. The parable thus demonstrates that it's only in solidarity with the victims of marginalization and in a willingness to share one's goods and possessions with the less fortunate ones that we can share the hope for a new world in an increasingly polarized world.

1. Introduction

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard has been studied broadly from two major perspectives. While the majority emphasize the goodness and generosity of a gracious God represented by the householder as the key for interpreting the parable², others stress the everyday experience of the expendables in their struggle for survival in an unjust society of the first century Palestine as the focal point.³ The former interpret the parable from an allegorical understanding, while the latter consider the parable as a codification of the experience of struggles of the Mediterranean social context and view it from a literal angle. Looking at the parable from an agrarian context of the Asian setting where more and more subsistence farmers are forced to commit suicide and at least some of them are driven to become extremists or terrorists, it seems probable that the latter interpretation is more relevant to us. However, the assumption here is that it is possible to look at the parable from the latter perspective without completely disregarding the former interpretation as the parables are recognized as polyvalent in their meaning and interpretation. We shall attempt here for a reading of the parable by placing it in its socio-literary context. An effort shall then be made to re-read the text with the hope that it might help us to better appreciate the parabolic expectations. Some tentative conclusions are drawn on the basis

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² See A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (London: SCM, 1960), 54; C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed., Fontana (London & Glasgow: Collins, 1961), 92; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 3rd rev. ed., (London: SCM, 1972), 37, 139; Dan O. Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 155; Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1966), 84, 86; Cf. B.B. Scott, *Hear then the Parables: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 282.

³ See William Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 84; V. George Shillington, "Saving Life and Keeping Sabbath (Matthew 20:1b-15): The Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard", in *Jesus and the Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, V. George Shillington, ed. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1997), 101.

of the reading that may have a bearing on our efforts towards sharing the hope for a new world within our own situations.

2. The Parabolic Setting

The setting of the parable, in our understanding, has to be viewed from a two-fold location, namely, the social location of the parabolic origin as well as its literary context within the Matthean text. While the social setting of the parable is a reflection on the social reality of the Mediterranean context and the struggles of the people for making a living in the context of extreme discriminations, as noted by commentators,⁴ the literary setting of the parable within the narrative structure of the Gospel of Matthew appears to place it in the context of a series of stories of exploitations.

2.1 The Social Context

Various views are proposed as the social setting of the parable by its interpreters. C. H. Dodd considered the original context as one wherein Jesus was labeled as friend of publicans and sinners⁵ while J. Jeremias perceived it as that of the scribal opponents against whom the parable serves as a weapon of controversy.⁶ For E. Linnemann, the setting was Jesus' response to his critics regarding his table fellowship with sinners and toll collectors,⁷ while for Donahue it served as the defense of Jesus' proclamation of God's love for the outcasts.⁸ J. D. Crossan saw the parable as shattering the human perception of the graciousness of God.⁹ W. Herzog viewed it as God's address to the grumbling workers proclaiming God's grace and goodness, and to those like them, who insisted on works and merit.¹⁰ The understanding of the parabolic setting has been determined in each case, by the interpreter's perception of Jesus' setting which in turn was influenced by his/her own milieu.

The social order consisted of a social structure with its few estate owners who lived in cities and whose holdings were on the increase, and a growing number of peasant small holders who lost their land to these large estate owners and have been relegated to the category of expendables on account of mounting debts burden and increased taxation. This has generated a patron-and-client society of unequal relationships with the estate owners assuming the role of patrons and those who have lost the land becoming their clients. In such a relationship the client's well being is determined by the closeness of rapport he/she maintains with the patron. The landless labourers in the story of the parable did not

⁴ Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 84-85; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 124-25; Cf. Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

⁵ *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 92.

⁶ *The Parables of Jesus*, 38.

⁷ Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 86.

⁸ John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 82-83.

⁹ J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma, California: Polebridge, 1992), 112.

¹⁰ Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 81.

belong to the ambit of such a relationship. They were outside of any assured protection and regular work opportunity and, hence, more vulnerable to be deprived of their basic wages even on rare occasions when they find a work to do.

2.2 The Literary Context

The literary context of the parable within the Matthean story line places it immediately prior to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Having left Galilee, Jesus is, in fact, already on the borders of Judea on the last leg of his journey, before entering the city of Jerusalem. The parable (Mt. 20:1-15) is carefully inserted by Matthew around the middle of the Markan order of events in Mark 10 between verses 31 and 32, as presented in the Matthean account (Mt. 19:1-30 // Mk. 10:1-31 and Mt. 20:17-34 // Mk. 10:32-52). Demands of discipleship (Mt. 19:16-22), obstacles posed by riches (Mt. 19:23-24) and Peter's question about the benefits of discipleship (Mt. 19:25-30) precede the parable, whereas the third prediction of passion (Mt. 20:17-19), the struggle for power on the part of James and John (Mt. 20:20-28) and the healing of the two blind men by a compassionate Jesus (Mt. 20:29-34) follows it. The sayings, "first will be last, and last will be first" (Mt. 19:30) and "last will be first, and first will be last" (Mt. 20:16) serve as an inclusion around the parable. There is thus a convergence in the presentation of the context of the parable both within its social and the literary setting in Matthew. While the rich and powerful broaden their horizons through exploitative measures the poor remain dependent on the mercies of the powerful or the divinely endowed.

There are divergent opinions with regard to what constituted the original form of the parable. While there are those who consider vv. 1-15¹¹ constituted the parable proper with verses 1a and 16 as Matthean additions along with the insertion of "first and last" / "last and first" in vv. 8, others consider that the parable ends with verse 13¹² or even verse 14.¹³ Crossan considers verse 15 as a Matthean addition, on which the moral consideration of the parabolic interpretation is based.¹⁴ He sees the parable ending at verse 13 and has divided it into two parts: Mt. 20:1-7 and Mt. 20:8-13 with a reversal of expectations as indicated in verse 8.¹⁵ It seems more appropriate to consider the parable as ending at v. 15. The parable appears to have a two-fold chiasmic structure ending with verse 7 in the first phase and with verse 15 in the second. The focus of both are on the landlord-labourer relationship, with a definite change of attitude on the part of both, as the story moves from the first to the second along with a reversal of the prominence of the characters between the two sections. In a chiasmic structure, the parable may be set as follows:¹⁶

¹¹ Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 91; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 136; Via, *Parables of Jesus*, 85-86.

¹² Crossan, *In Parables*, 111.

¹³ Dan O. Via "Parable and Example Story: A Literary Structuralist Approach" in *Semeia* 1 (1974), 125; B.B. Scott, *Hear then the Parables*, 285-89.

¹⁴ Crossan, *In Parables*, 109-10.

¹⁵ Crossan, *In Parables*, 111.

¹⁶ See Shillington, "Saving Life and Keeping Sabbath (Matthew 20:1b-15)", 96, for a similar structure. B. B. Scott, *Hear then the Parables*, 288-89, divides the 'surface structure' on the basis of hiring and payment. See Crossan, *In Parables*, 111, for a reversal structure.

I. Relationship between land owners and labourers in the ancient world (Mt. 20:1-7)

- a) Hiring of the first group of labourers on an agreed wage of a denarius for a day's work (Mt. 20:2)
- b) Hiring of the second, third and fourth groups of labourers on an appropriate wage (Mt. 20:3-5)
- c) Hiring of the fifth group of labourers with no wage agreement for one hour of work (Mt. 20:6-7)

II. A new vision of land owners and labourers' relationship (Mt. 20:8-15)

- c) The fifth group of labourers receives a wage of a denarius first, for one hour of work (Mt. 20:9)
- b) The first group of labourers receives a similar wage as was agreed upon, for a day's job (Mt. 20:10)
- a) Discrimination on distribution of wage without consideration for work hours denied (Mt. 20:11-15)

3. A Reading of the Parable

Matthew presents the parable as one that concerns the reign of God, for he begins it with the words, "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." (Mt.20:1). The characters represented in the parable are the owner of the vineyard, the estate manager, as well as the labourers who worked in the vineyard. The dominant characters are the householder and the vineyard workers. The role of the manger is only to disperse the wages at the end of the day's work, as per the instructions of the householder, thus secondary to the motif of the parable. It is quite possible that Jesus' arrival at Jericho with its large estates of date palms and orchards and the estates of vineyards in the Judean hills, the place towards which he was embarking on a journey, together with the refusal of the wealthy to part with their riches as witnessed in his recent encounter (Mt. 19:16-22) even on the face of increasing joblessness and struggle for survival, served as a perfect setting for Jesus' parable. On the course of his journey from Galilee, Jesus may also have encountered people in the market place and at street corners who, having lost their piece of small land holding to large estates, were wasting away their time for want of work. This contrasting experience of the lack of care and concern on the part of the rich and the plight of the poor struggling in life for survival may have prompted Jesus to utter this parable.

The parable centers on the action of the owner of the vineyard in relation to the labourers whom he engages to work in his vineyard, irrespective of whether he is considered as a gracious person¹⁷ or as an elitist oppressor¹⁸ of the landless people. Both the sections within the parabolic structure concentrate on this aspect. In the first section, the labourers are presented as wasting away their time on account of want of work. Even though they have been at the market place from the dawn of the day, expectantly awaiting the call of someone with an offer of work, not all of them were lucky enough to find a job. While some found work during the course of the day at different intervals, others had to wait the whole day, even until the fag end of the day, to find work. The scarcity of work

¹⁷ Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 91; Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 136.

¹⁸ Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 84-87.

¹⁹ Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 88.

opportunities,¹⁹ even if it were a harvesting season as, perhaps, indicated by the urgency of the work to be completed, badly affected the fortunes of life for the working class. The vineyard owner, despite an urgent work to be completed, was presented as one unsure of the actual requirement of the work force necessary to complete the job. Hence, he had to return a number of times during the day to find adequate number of workers. Was it on account of the vineyard owner not being well-versed in the agricultural task, which has always been performed on his behalf, by an estate manager, or, was it his desire to get the job done with the least number of workers so that the margin of his profit would increase, even if that meant a few extra trips to the market? We are only left to infer. While both are within the realm of possibility, the latter concern seems to have been uppermost in the mind of the owner of the vineyard in prompting him to seek out the work force on his own as against the normal practice of entrusting the job to the estate manager.²⁰

The initial impression of the estate owner, as gained from the parable, is not that of an eager person interested in providing work for an otherwise helpless workforce. It was his dire need to complete the job on hand, before the day gets over, which was responsible for his repeated visits to the market place to find additional hands. His overt concern for the margin of profits and the lack of bargaining power on the part of the labourers²¹ leaves him with the option to determine what he would pay his employees at the end of the day. Hence, he refuses to enter into a wage agreement with all whom he employed to work in his vineyard. The attempt perhaps was to pay the least²² and to exact the most from his work force. Failure to assess the requirement of workforce at the initial stage itself, not entering into a wage agreement with the workers called at successive hours, and his own visit to the market place to find workers seem to confirm the resolve on the part of the estate owner to get his work completed with the minimum of expenses. It's only his realization that the work doesn't seem to progress at the expected pace that led him to seek more help. This probably also explains the reason for his successive visits to the market to find workers at various hours of the day.

The workers wait patiently for their call to work as they had no other choice. Despite the day wearing away, they do not leave, as finding work was essential for their own sustenance and, perhaps, also for that of their family. Therefore, they continue to wait in expectant hope that someone will hire them even at the last hour. This is evident from the response of the last group, who said, we are here, "because no one has hired us" (Mt. 20:7a). When their turn came, they did not even bother to bargain for a decent wage, but just grabbed the opportunity for work that came their way. Perhaps, their bargaining power was lost on account of their failure to find work the whole day. All that mattered now was to do the work that came on hand even if that meant not being adequately paid. Perhaps, it was also due to the scarcity of work available in relation to its demand. Their situation of need has made them doubly vulnerable and dependent on the supposed 'goodness' and

²⁰ Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 82; Cf. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, 85, for a description of the mentality of great estate owners.

²¹ Luise Schottroff, "Human Solidarity and the Goodness of God: The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard" in W. Schottroff and W. Steggemann, eds., *God of the Lowly* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 134.

²² Schottroff, "Human Solidarity", 132.

'mercy' of the householder although they knew from experience that the interest of the estate owners were merely their own profit as against the pressing need for survival on the part of the workers.

The second part of the story takes place at the close of the day. The workers are now paid wages for their work as ordered by the owner of the vineyard. Surprisingly, the owner of the vineyard decides to pay everyone the same wage irrespective of the hours of work. This has resulted in dissatisfaction among the workers. Not only that the last group of workers was paid first, but they were also paid the same wage. While this may have brought happiness on the face of the ones who worked the least, those who worked the full day were not quite satisfied. There may have been a heightened expectation for a better wage on their part in the light of a full wage received by the late comers, although the agreement was only for a day's wage. The response of those who came in between is not mentioned. Perhaps, they too have felt the same. For the sake of contrast those who came last and first are mentioned. The complaint of those who came first resulted from the disappointment of not receiving a better wage despite working the whole day.²³ In their own reckoning, they stood to receive a higher wage than what was actually received. Hence the grumbling, on the part of the workers who came first, was on the belying of their own expectations than any injustice on the part of the householder since he had kept the contract that he entered with them. The workers are thus presented not as the deprived ones, as in the first section, but as those who do not feel happy with the generosity of the estate owner.

In the second section of the story the estate manager is presented as a 'generous' person. He determined the amount to be paid to each of the workers and the order in which they were to be paid, although the actual payment was made by the estate manager himself. The householder, in his wisdom, has determined to make the payment, beginning with the workers who came last, the reverse order in which the work was done—those who worked the least receiving the wage first, and those worked the most, at the last. Besides, he has also decided to pay all workers a day's wage. Both of these acts were contrary to expectations and the normal everyday practice. Inasmuch as these were not the usual practice, the story line calls attention to the strangeness of the occurrence, inviting people to pause and think. An estate owner who was only concerned with his own profit in the first stage of the story has now suddenly become a 'good' and 'generous' person interested in the welfare of his workers. The wage for a day though was not such a generous payment for the householder to make, it was sufficient enough to meet the sustenance needs of the workers for a day.²⁴ The extraordinary conduct of the vineyard owner was sufficient to raise questions within the mind of the listener with regard to the identity of the person. The action of the estate owner also seems to stress the 'goodness' and 'generosity' on his part in so far as he paid all workers a day's wage even though not all have worked a full day. The graciousness of the estate owner may be noticed in his action that not only overturned the normal expectations but also reversed it.

²³ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 114.

²⁴ A. T. Cadoux, *The Parables of Jesus: Their Art and Use* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 101.

The reversal of expectations of the two groups of workers regarding their wages come about as a result of the action of the vineyard owner whose deed was itself contrary to expectations. The first section talks about the reality of the social set-up where people suffer on account of lack of job and the refusal of estate owners to provide adequate work to poor people waiting for opportunity in the market place, and the reversal of such an experience, though on account of the need of the vineyard owner himself. In the second section, without any apparent reason, the householder chooses to provide all workers an equal wage. While the workers should all have been happy for an equal wage received for their work and the opportunity to help support their families at least for that particular day, the former group seems to grumble among themselves for what they deemed as "obvious" injustice to them. Besides, reversal is also evident in the order of payment which, contrary to practice, first goes to the ones who joined the work last, and the ones who worked the whole day, receiving their wage at the last.

Similar to an owner who refuses to part with his wealth, except perhaps to his beneficiaries on account of his own goodness, as in the case of a patron-client relationship, the owner in the story is presented as 'generous' to the workers for having paid them all a day's wage. This again is against the anticipated behaviour as an owner is never expected to pay more than what is due to a worker.²⁵ This is more so when there is even an absence of a wage agreement in the first place. Such experiences are true in all agrarian societies including the Indian context. The reversal, therefore, arrests the people's expectations. Further, attention is drawn to the estate owner's action, by way of presenting the reaction of the workers. Thus, double attention is directed towards the action of the owner and the parable to have a two-fold effect. It is based on the reality of the social struggles of the time, and at the same time also presents God as the one who is unlike the owner of the vineyard, described in the first section of the story.

God is a gracious father, who, as the second section of the story narrates, does not discriminate between people on account of unavailable opportunities. His generosity is for all. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. The basic needs for support and survival takes precedence over the opportunity afforded by a person. The generosity of the land owner thus overcomes people's expectations, making it possible for him to create new possibilities of relationships. Via considers, "our very existence depends on whether we will accept God's gracious dealings, irrespective of whether or not it measures up to our own perception of how things should be ordered in the world."²⁶ Human setting being what it is, and the attempt always being to deprive people of affordable opportunities, one cannot be blamed for loss of opportunities. But God is constantly gracious, even the last and the least are recognized in God's scheme of affairs.²⁷ This is further confirmed

²⁵ B. B. Scott, *Hear then the Parables: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 292, note 43.

²⁶ Via, *The Parables*, 154.

²⁷ M. J. Joseph, "A Case for 'the least and the last' in God's kingdom: Biblical Reflections based on St. Matthew 21 (20):1-16", in *Indian Interpretation of the Bible: Festschrift in honour of Prof. Dr. Joseph Pathrpankal, cmi*, Augustine Thottakara, cmi, ed. (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000), 394-95.

by the general interest of the Matthean Jesus towards the poor, the marginalized and the least in the Matthean narration of the story of Jesus.

4. Some Insights for a New World of Hope

The parable originates within a social situation where there was an increase of riches of the few who owned large estates but had no concern for the poor and the deprived people. There was also a manifold increase among the marginalized and expendables for whom life was a burden with none to support them to make a living. The textual context too portrays a situation of conflict between the rich and the powerful, on the one hand, and the struggles of the deprived for care and compassion, on the other. In such a context of extremities, the action of the householder, though familiar in the first part of the parable, turns out to be unexpected in the second. The contrast in the conduct of the householder and even among the labourers in the two parts presents the owner of the vineyard in a more positive frame in the latter part. He is portrayed as compassionate towards the plight of the poor workers. It is evident in his willingness to treat each one equally in matters of their wage, irrespective of the number of hours of labour they put in. People are thus challenged to consider the identity of the householder. Inasmuch as he could be no regular estate owner as their experience would testify, they would perceive him to be none but God. God does not discriminate against people on the basis of merit, but God is generous enough to be concerned for the basic necessities of all. The experience of the kingdom of heaven is similar wherein, God by his graciousness, will act on behalf of all the deprived ones, meeting the sustenance needs of all, as God is partial to none. It is in partnering God in sharing one's own resources to meet the basic survival needs of the marginalized that one would experience the presence of the reign of God. God identifies himself with the struggles of peoples. His graciousness is not in letting one escape the struggles of life, but standing in solidarity with the struggling ones, so that they will experience a surprise-the surprise of a caring and sharing presence of God in the midst of their struggles. The