

The First Shall Be Last¹

(Analysis of Matthew 20:1-16)

INTRODUCTION:

1. The parables of Jesus allow us to see ourselves in other people. Where do you see yourself in this parable of the laborers in the vineyard?
2. What is your attitude toward the owner of the vineyard?

I. THE SETTING

- A. In point of time during Jesus' ministry,
 1. this parable was spoken sometime after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and after Jesus had withdrawn to Ephraim, but before his coming to Jericho on his final trip back to Jerusalem with his disciples.²
 2. While the exact time in Jesus' ministry when he told this parable cannot be certainly known, it was probably only a few weeks before his triumphant entry into Jerusalem.
- B. In scriptural context,
 1. this passage follows Jesus' discussion with the rich young ruler who sorrowfully left Jesus because he did not want to dispense with his many possessions, as Jesus had instructed him (Matthew 19:16-22).
 2. Jesus then informed his disciples that it is hard for those who are rich to enter into the kingdom of God.
 - a. The disciples were astonished because they apparently supposed the rich would be favored to be among the first to enter.
 - b. When Peter asked what the twelve would have, Jesus said they would "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:28-30. See also Mark 10:29-31 and Luke 18:29-30).
 3. Although the incident regarding the rich young ruler and Jesus subsequent conversation is recorded also by both Mark and Luke, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard is recorded only in Matthew's gospel.

II. THE FLOW OF THE PASSAGE

- A. On the surface, the parable is stated simply and in a straight forward manner.
 1. When an owner of a vineyard needed laborers he went to where workers were waiting to be hired.
 2. He took all of them and put them to work in his vineyard.
 3. Because he did not have enough laborers he went back four other times during the day.

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²This assertion is based not only on the general indications given in the gospel records, but more specifically by harmonies of the gospels by A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, New York: Harper & Row, 1922, xxv, and William Arnold Stevens and Ernest DeWitt Burton, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Historical Study*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, 11.

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4. Each time he hired all that were available to work.
 5. Only with the first group hired did he agree upon salary terms for the day's work.
 6. With all others he simply promised to do what was right.
 7. When evening came, he paid them all for their work.
- B. The parable focuses on two attitudes – generosity and jealousy – generosity by the owner of the vineyard, and jealousy by the first workers in the vineyard.
1. To those who came to work at the beginning of the day, the owner paid just wages according to their agreement.
 2. To those who came to work later in the day, the owner paid a generous wage because although they had not worked as much, he paid them as much as he had paid the first.
 3. Those who were first hired then became jealous because they saw that the late comers received equally as much as they themselves had received.
 4. The owner then declared that he had a right to be generous to those who came late.
- C. It is at the point of paying his workers that the parable becomes puzzling.
1. Why does he pay first those who were hired last? Why does he pay them all the same, when those who came at later times did not deserve as much as those who had worked from early morning?
 2. This “most puzzling of all the parables . . . is very improbable; and were it not told by Jesus, we would hesitate to believe it.”³ Had the steward of the vineyard paid those who were first hired their wages, as previously agreed upon, and then dismissed them, they would not have been around to see what the owner paid those workers who came later and would then not have complained that the owner of the vineyard was unfair.
 3. Apparently, the owner of the vineyard wanted the first employed workers to know something they would not have known had he paid them first.
 - a. What did he want them to know?
 - b. More specifically, since this parable was told for the sake of his apostles, what did Jesus want them to know?

III. THRUST STATEMENTS AND AN EXPLANATION

- A. The answer is given at both the beginning and ending of the parable. “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matthew 19:30). “So the last will be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16).
1. But what does that mean? Not all, but “many” of those who are first will be last.
 2. In what sense will many that are first be last?
- B. Since this is a parable about the kingdom of God, i.e., the reign of God, then it is applicable to those who are under God's reign, i.e., who are in the kingdom of God.
1. The meaning of different times of entrance into the kingdom is variously disputed, but probably refers to those who enter at different periods in their lifetimes.
 2. If this is correct, then those who enter early in their lifetimes work longer than those who enter into the kingdom at some later period.
 3. If reward in the kingdom of heaven is based upon meritorious service, then those who work from early youth may deserve more than those who work from later life.

³Neil R. Lightfoot, *Lessons from the Parables*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965, 147.

4. However, since rewards in the kingdom are based on God's grace, not meritorious works, then no one deserves more than others.
- C. While one may be first in point of time of entrance into the kingdom, i.e., at an early age, he may be last in appreciating the generosity of God.
1. And whereas one may be last in time of entrance into the kingdom, i.e., at a late age in life, he may be first in God's esteem for appreciating His generosity.
 2. The two attitudes of generosity and jealousy are contrasted at extremes to each other, and everyone may examine himself or herself to place themselves somewhere on a continuum between them.

IV. HOW THE PASSAGE ADDRESSES THE ISSUE

- A. Within the scriptural context, the issue under consideration is really that of a covetous attitude.
1. The rich young ruler had demonstrated himself to be covetous.
 2. Afterward, Jesus declared that those who are rich will scarcely enter into the kingdom of God.
 3. Then when Peter had asked what the disciples would receive, Jesus told them what they would receive (Matthew 19:27-29), just as the owner of the vineyard agreed with his 1st hour workers on their salary for a day's work.
- B. The question now is whether the disciples, who know what they will receive, will have the right attitude toward others.
- C. Will they be as pleased with what they are promised when they see the Father's generosity toward those who come into the kingdom of God after them and who do not work as hard or as long as they do?
- D. That they were not yet free of jealousy is indicated by the next event in the scriptural context, viz., the request for James and John to sit at the Master's right hand when the kingdom comes (Matthew 20:17-24; Mark 10:32-41).
1. Though the request is not granted, the other disciples grumble their displeasure at the request.
 2. By their murmuring, they indicate that they have a covetous spirit.
 3. They are not yet unlike the rich young ruler nor those first employed in the parable.

V. APPLICATION OF THE PASSAGE

- A. Where are you in the parable?
1. Have you entered to work in the vineyard at the 1st hour? There is no guarantee you'll have another opportunity to enter into the Lord's vineyard.
 2. Have you entered at the 3rd, 6th, 9th, or 11th hour? i.e., at your first opportunity?
- B. More importantly, what's your attitude toward the Master's generosity?
1. Do you think you should have more than others? Did you bargain for what you shall receive? Are you jealous of what others may receive from the Lord?
 2. Or, are you simply expecting the Lord to do what is right?