

## Section 50

JESUS TELLS THE STORY OF  
THE ELEVENTH HOUR LABORERS

TEXT: 20:1-16

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that was a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. 2 And when he had agreed with the laborers for a shilling a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing in the marketplace idle; 4 and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. 6 And about the eleventh *hour* he went out, and found others standing; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? 7 They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. 8 And when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto the first. 9 And when they came that *were hired* about the eleventh hour, they received every man a shilling. 10 And when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received every man a shilling. 11 And when they received it, they murmured against the householder, 12 saying, These last have spent but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. 13 But he answered and said to one of them, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a shilling? 14 Take up that which is thine and go thy way; it is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? or is thine eye evil, because I am good? 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last.

## THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Since Matthew was not encumbered with chapter divisions or verse separations (all things of later date), it may be that this section is but the continuation of the teaching given in the incident recorded in 19:27-30. In fact, the present section ends with the same words. (v. 16) If so, what are the points of connection that

illuminate the meaning of our present text? That is, what is there in Peter's (wrong-headed) question that finds further answer in this parable?

- b. Above and beyond particular details involved in the application of this parable, what is its obvious, majestic theme permeating this story? Some think that the sovereignty of God in dispensing His mercies is the main theme of the parable. If you agree with this evaluation, how do you account for the fact that at least some of the workers in the story actually earned the pay for which they had contracted at the beginning of the workday? That would not be grace, but merit! (Cf. Ro. 4:4) How do you explain this?
- c. Who are "the first" and "the last"?
  - (1) Jews and Gentiles? i.e. the Jews called first to God's service, the Gentiles called last?
  - (2) Rich and poor? i.e. first in the wealth, position and fame; last because poor?
  - (3) Early personal disciples of Jesus, as opposed to later generations of Christians?
  - (4) Church members in positions of greatness, as opposed to humbler servants?
  - (5) Life-long church members, as opposed to death-bed repenters? On what basis do you answer as you do? How much of this parable is to be considered essential to the point stated in the last verse (16)?
- d. Does this parable, with each laborer's being paid the same wage, speak to the question of rewards in heaven? If so, how? If not, why not?
- e. If we have no business discussing rewards in a heaven to which we do not deserve to go, why does the Lord, in other contexts, promise rewards for Christian service? Are there rewards, or not?
- f. Of what principles in Jesus' sermon on personal relationships in Matthew 18 is this section an illustration?

### PARAPHRASE

Because many human expectations concerning their own merits may well be overturned (19:30), God's Kingdom may be illustrated by the landlord who went out at daybreak to engage grape-pickers for this vineyard. He made a contractual arrangement with the workmen for the regular wage of a denarius a day and sent them to work

in his fields. About nine o'clock he went out and found other men standing around in the marketplace, unemployed. He invited these too: "You men go work in my vineyard and I will treat you right at the end of the day." So off they went. About noon and again about three o'clock in the afternoon, he went out and did the same thing as before. Then around five o'clock he went to town and found other men waiting for work. To these he said, "Why have you been standing here all day, doing nothing?" Their answer was, "Because nobody has employed us." He answered them, "You go work in my fields too."

At day's end, the master of the vineyard ordered his foreman, "Call the workmen in and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first ones hired." So, when those who began to work at five, just an hour before quitting time, stepped up to be paid, each man received a denarius apiece. Then when the first ones hired came, they assumed that they would receive a bonus. But they were paid a denarius each like those before them. As they took their pay, they protested to the landlord, saying, "These latecomers worked only one hour, and you gave them pay equal to those of us who have done the heavy work and sweated in the blazing sun!" But he replied to their spokesman, "My friend, I am not being unfair to you. You contracted with me for a denarius, did you not? So, take the money you earned and go home. I choose to pay this last man what I pay you. Surely I am allowed to do what I please with what belongs to me. Must you show a calculating selfishness because I am generous with them?" So you see, many human expectations about rewards for their work for God will be overturned.

### SUMMARY

Continuing His discussion of Peter's question, "What shall we have?" and the others' troubled query, "Who in the world then can be saved?," Jesus illustrated His pithy maxim about the reversal of positions of relative importance, assuring His people: "That you will be paid for your service in the Kingdom is assured, but it will be on a basis different from what you expect."

## NOTES

IV. THE LORDSHIP OF GOD IN HIS JUSTICE AND MERCY  
(20:1-16)

20:1 **For** indisputably links the following parable with the foregoing section on the rich young ruler and Jesus' discussion of the peril of wealth (19:16-30) of which this is an illustrative story. In fact, the punch line of this illustration (20:16) is roughly the same as that which concludes the preceding chapter (19:30). Indeed, were we not hampered with late-date, human chapter divisions, we would have assumed that 19:30 were the real beginning of our story which concludes by reiterating the point. (20:16) If so, this fact will be an invaluable key to understanding the story. **The kingdom of heaven** in this illustration is seen from generally the same perspective as that in the Paradise of the Unmerciful Servant. (18:23-35) Note the identical pleonastic use of *anthrópo basileî* (18:23) and *anthrópo oikodespóte* (20:1) with which each story begins. While there are differences of emphasis, the similarity of the two parables lies in Jesus' use of both to picture how God's grace and justice function in His dealings with His servants. This is the Kingdom, or Rule of God.

**A man that was a householder . . . went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard.** **Householder** (*oikodespótes* = "master of the house," Arndt-Gingrich, 560; "landlord, head of the house" Rocci, 1312; Thayer, 439, adds "householder," Mt. 10:25; 13:27, 52; 20:1, 11; 21:33; cf. v. 40; 24:43; Mk. 14:14; Lk. 14:21; 12:39; 13:25) The fact that what is being illustrated is God's Kingdom leads to the conclusion that Jesus intends to underline God's ownership of everything by calling the principle figure in the story "the landlord, the lord of the vineyard." (20:8) This point will be especially heightened in the climax (20:13, 14) **Early in the morning:** in the busy season every farmer's workday is from "can see" until "can't see." Jesus pictures here a twelve-hour workday from about 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. This rich farmer must have begun his grape-harvest just as soon as the sun was coming up, because no sooner had he organized the first wave of pickers at their work than her went back to town at 9:00 for more hands. **To hire laborers into his vineyard,** as verse 3 shows, he went to the place where just such day-laborers could be found, the town square. It is quite probable that the vineyard labor intended by Jesus is the main vintage

when the largest quantity of grapes are fully ripe and must be rapidly harvested. While it is true that grapes can begin ripening in the Jordan Valley as early as June and on the coast later in the summer, the main grape-harvest in the hills occurs in autumn as in Italy. (*I.S.B.E.*, 3086f) During the early, smaller gatherings, the individual vinedressers can, with the help of a few extra hands, keep the ripening grapes picked back and moving to market as table grapes. But when the big grape-harvest arrives, the entire ripened crop is harvested carried in baskets to the wine-presses. The families of the vineyard keepers camp out in the vineyard during this time in order to be able to labor as long as possible, uninterrupted by having to return back to town at night. (See also Thomson, *Land and Book*, II, 411) This special busyness connected with the vintage, that is not particularly connected with any other phase of vinedressing, points to the last, big harvest of grapes before the fall rains come and ruin the quality of the vintage.

Depending, of course, on what route Jesus took through Perea on His way to the ford of the Jordan at Jericho, He would have passed close to an area even yet today rich in vineyards. (Rand-McNally, *Bible Atlas*, 161)

On the western slopes of the mountains of Gilead there is Abelkeramim ("meadow of vineyards," Jdg. 11:33) just about six and a half English miles southwest of Amman, Jordan. (Cf. Grollenberg, *Shorter Atlas*, Maps 3 and 5; *I.S.B.E.*, 5) McGarvey (*Lands of the Bible*, 366) noted that Es Salt, about 20 km (14 miles) northwest of Amman had quite extensive vineyards in his day. These would be 16 km (10 mi.) off to Jesus' left if the usual Jordan Valley road were their route. But if they were travelling as far east as Jerash, Aijlon and Salt, they would pass right through this district, although not at harvest time.

If so, these vineyards would furnish a handy illustration of what Jesus intends to teach in the parable and would be further proof that He had not yet crossed the Jordan.

If we notice that the working day for all the laborers ended with the payoff at sunset, a symbol of the end of everyone's possibility to work and his subsequent retribution, then the entire working day pictured before us represents the sum total of man's labor in God's service. **Early in the morning**, accordingly, from the point of view of the Apostles, would indicate those privileged to enter Kingdom service from its very inception, an observation that points ominously

to the Apostles themselves.

20:2 **And when he had agreed with the laborers for a shilling a day, he sent them into his vineyard.** A **shilling a day** is the English Revision's attempt to translate *a denarius a day*, which was the standard working-man's wage for a day's work. (Arndt-Gingrich, 178) It is the buying power of this coin that furnishes us some basis for establishing the value of other coins which may be figured as multiples of the denarius. The main question is always what could a common laborer buy with his daily pay.

Tacitus (*Annals*, 1, 17) notes that two-thirds of a Roman denarius was the daily pay of the Roman soldier. Polybius (2, 15) mentions the price of a day's hospitality in the inns of Cisalpine Gaul as only one-half as, equal to one-twentieth of a denarius. (*P.H.C.*, XXII, 463) A drachma (= 1 denarius) a day was also a day's wage for a trusted guide. (Tobit 5:15 LXX) 2 denarii would pay a hostelry bill until "the good Samaritan" returned. (Lk. 10:35)

Whether the denarius be judged high or low for a day's pay, it must be remembered that, in an agricultural society, the farm day-laborers must make what they can in their high season, from spring to fall, moving from one harvest to another, and from crop to crop, before the bad weather comes and they cannot earn anything but what they can make indoors. Theirs is a precarious existence that depends upon their being hired on during the good seasons so they can make it through the lean ones. This fact will exculpate the men hired later in the day in Jesus' parable. (See on 20:3-7 on "idle.")

Since the landowner had gone out to hire (*misthósasthai* from *misthōs*, pay, wages), and he employed them after agreement for the perfectly normal, going wage for this category of labor, the relationship between them is strictly contractual. There is nothing unusual about the *denarius a day*, except that the fundamental point of the story will revolve around this contractual agreement. After any one of these day-laborers will have put in his day, he will have earned no more or less than his denarius. It might be instructive to ask about the agreement: does Jesus mean to imply that there had been some haggling over the price before the final agreement was reached *for a denarius a day*? If so, this bargaining spirit of the first workers hired stands in contrast to all those who were hired later, who came for "whatever is right" (v. 4) or even for no promise but the trustworthiness of the Lord (v. 7). From the point of view of unemployment and the loss of a day's work, those hired first would

consider themselves the most fortunate, a fact reflected in the reality by those who enjoy great opportunities of service in the Kingdom of God, especially by those fortunate disciples who got in on the ground floor at its beginning. This opinion would be adjusted at the final payoff, the judgment. These laborers could well represent any, like Peter, who carefully negotiate their work contract with God: "We have left everything and followed you. What then shall we have?" (19:27) In fact, the spirit of bargaining for a contract separates these hired first from all those hired later, so we must consider only two groups: those who had a carefully stipulated contract, but grumbled; and those that came trusting in the lord's fairness and were happy with his graciousness.

20:3 **And he went out about the third hour.** If, as is likely, Jesus is counting time by the Jewish system which begins at six o'clock in the morning, **the third hour** is nine o'clock. **He went out . . . and saw others standing in the market-place idle; 4 and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard.** This system of securing workers is still in use even in modern countries like Italy, where day workers, available to harvest grapes, olives and other truck farm products, gather early in the public piazza of the town as their point of contact with hiring farmers who need workers for that day. There are, of course, variations in the system such as use of professional mediators who seek out the farm owners for the laborers and who seek out the laborers for the farm owners—all for a fee. There is usually considerable hubbub involved in the hassle over wages and rights before the agreement is reached and the workers finally depart for the fields, a fact that gives the early morning market-place the air of a county fair. In some country towns the after-sunset hours turn the public square into what seems like a town meeting with a considerable portion of the male population roaming the square, discussing the day's events, seeking employers or employees for the following day, etc. **Standing in the market-place idle**, therefore, means that these day-laborers were where they should have been to find work. They were not loafers unconcerned about work.

**What is right, I will give you.** There must have been considerable trust generated by this generous householder, since he could start workers moving toward his fields to work for **whatever is right**, "no questions asked." These workers accepted his work offer, probably expecting a fraction of the denarius that would normally fall to them for a portion of a day's work. But the point is that they trust him enough to work for him, even without strict contracts to protect their

supposed "workers' rights."

**20:5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. Again!** The vineyard not only must have been large and the crop bountiful, but there must have been some urgency that more and more workers he engaged to bring in the loads of grapes before sunset. So the householder made trips back to the market-place at noon and at three in the afternoon. The workers he found do not haggle, but gladly hurry off to the vineyard, relieved to be able to work for even part of a day.

**20:6 And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? The eleventh hour,** or 5:00 p.m., is almost quitting time. Although grapes begin ripening as early as June in the Jordan Valley (*J.S.B.E.*, 3086), the big grape-harvest occurs in autumn in Palestine, so the sun would not go down until about seven with a long twilight. This would give these last hired a couple of easy hours in the cool of the late afternoon to work. (cf. 19:12) However, according to the protesters, these last just got in one good hour before quitting time. If quitting time at 6:00 p.m. seems too early for later summer or early fall, since there would still be considerable daylight to see to work by, it should be remembered that the remainder of the time would probably be used to walk back into town or to their homes, and most of these workers had been at work since morning.

**Why stand ye here all the day idle?** Had the householder noticed them earlier in the day during his earlier efforts at rounding up workers? It is doubtful that he had talked with these men before this instant, as their answer implies.

**20:7 They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us.** No dead-beats these, their unemployment is not culpable, since they had lost a whole day's work merely because no one had engaged them for the day. Their readiness to go to work without even so much as a promise of payment, confident in the master's goodness, is evidence not only that their unemployment was not caused by unwillingness or refusal on their part, but also that they had been actively seeking work all day. There is no promise here for willful laziness or refusal to work for God when the first opportunity presents itself. This parable cannot be thought to hold out any hope for last-minute repentance for inconsiderate people who reject the call of God all their life, but decide at the last to take advantage of the Lord and accept His gracious invitation with a view to receiving the same reward as any other saint who labored faithfully all his life. McGarvey

(*Fourfold Gospel*, 553) wrote an interesting counter-parable that more correctly pictures the futility of such calculating shrewdness. The eleventh-hour laborers in Jesus' parable, on the other hand, had apparently never been approached by anyone and eagerly grasped at the first opportunity offered them.

This verse gives a preview of the graciousness of the lord of the vineyard, for he is not merely concerned about the progress of work on his estate, but also about these men who had desperately and patiently hung on to hope of work even past the time when any hope of being hired for that day was gone. Who ever heard of engaging workers almost at quitting time for just one hour's work? In fact, who would have thought that so provident a landlord as this man—who, in the reality, represents God—would not have hired enough men at the beginning of the day?

If those hired first represent the Apostles who ask, "What shall we receive?," and whose harvesting of souls and royal ministry of judging the Israel of God over the centuries by means of their writings in the NT, then they must learn that the Lord may well call other workers after their own ministry had long begun, and that these latter laborers would be paid according to the gracious free will of God, not on the basis of merits, and not even an Apostle could complain if these last received pay equal to that of an Apostle. If so, the call of God comes to other workers centuries later in the present world age. So, God could not have engaged these latter Christians to enter His fields until later. This text, then, can furnish no criticism of His providence or foresight. Rather, its total impact confirms both.

But this man continues hiring workers all day long! The point is clear: he is fully as interested in the needs of the people who need employment as he is in getting his own work done. God accepts every man who is willing to serve Him, even those who begin quite late with respect to others.

There is no price-haggling here: the men are only too glad to work, even if for a short while. Note that the later the workers are hired, the less claim they have toward their employer and the more they have to rely upon his goodness.

20:8 **And when even was come**, i.e. around 6:00 p.m. (Cf. 20:6, 12), came the time for the payoff of the day-workers, as required by the Law. (Lev. 19:13; Dt. 24:14f; cf. Jas. 5:4) **The lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward. The steward** (*epítropos*) is anyone

to whom the administration of something is entrusted (*epitrépo*), hence "manager, foreman, steward" (Arndt-Gingrich, 303), "superintendent, administrator, agent, curator, governor, protector, prefect, procurator" (Rocci, 745). In this case he is an employee in the master's household and estate who manages the keeping of financial accounts and pays the harvest crew. Some see Jesus as the *steward* of God, **the Lord of the vineyard**, since He acts as Mediator between God and man, and will be the One who will repay every man according to his deeds. (16:27) If so, the striking fact that, in the story, it is the owner himself, not his steward who calls the workers into the vineyard, leads to the remarkable observation that God Himself earnestly and generously calls men into His service no matter how late it is in terms of time left to serve.

**Call the laborers, and pay them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.** It really made no difference who got paid first, just so everyone was treated justly. However, this order of payment is deliberately calculated to raise the right questions about which Jesus intends to make comment. (19:30; 20:16) The fact that those who should have received proportionately less pay are not only paid first, although hired last, but paid an amount equal to that of those who thought they merited more, could not but evoke comment, and this is precisely what Jesus is counting on. Jesus' tone here is specifically polemical and directly aimed at correcting the calculating legalism that wants God's pay scale to be prorated on the basis of personal merits, seniority, strictly counted hours and earnings, etc.

20:9 **And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a shilling.** To their delight, the last ones hired, who had worked only one hour (20:12), unexpectedly received a denarius, the equivalent of a full day's pay. . . . Because they had not earned more than one hour's pay, the full denarius represents pure grace on the part of the lord of the vineyard. There may be several motives why the landlord should decide to pay every man a full day's wage irrespective of the time put in:

1. The lord of the vineyard alone knew what the labor of each man was worth to him. If it was urgent that this vintage he finished rapidly, then time was of the essence, and, as the hours rushed by, the rested vigor of unfatigued hands would prove particularly precious to the lord of the vineyard.
2. Each man hired had been true to the only opportunity to work offered him, regardless of when he had been hired, a fact true

even of those hired first. From this standpoint also every worker was actually equal. Each is paid, not on length or supposed importance of his labors, but upon fidelity to opportunity.

3. Those hired later had shown a magnanimous trust in their employer. Why should he not reward them magnanimously for coming when he needed them without losing precious time haggling over contracts, hours, wages and extra fringe benefits?

At any rate, he remains master of his own choices, except in the case of those laborers who had a specific contract, and this will be the main point of the parable.

Even though nothing further is indicated about the other workers who had put in only part of a day, having been hired at 9:00, 12:00 and 3:00, it would suit the tone of the parable to surmise that they too received a full denarius apiece. However, if the payoff proceeded consecutively "from the last unto the first" (20:8), then, because of the relatively more hours worked by those engaged relatively earlier, the anticipating of those last in line would be proportionately decreased, because the ratio of hours worked to pay received would increase. This may explain why Jesus omitted them from this part of the story. Or, it may be that the steward had only begun to go down the line of workmen paying them the full denarius when those hired first, impatiently asserting their seniority, cut in after those hired last, so as to be able to be paid second, thus leaving the payoff of those hired later in the day completely out of the picture.

The comments among the onlooking workmen waiting to be paid must have sounded something like this: "Wow, a full day's pay for just one hour's work! I wonder if the rest of us will be paid like that . . . Think of it: a denarius an hour, and I've turned in almost 12 hours today!"

20:10 **And when the first came,** they had already faced the annoyance of having to wait in line for their pay, even though they undoubtedly expected precedence over everyone hired after them. Another humiliation awaits them: no bonus! **They supposed that they would receive more** precisely because they had worked more hours and put up with more wearing toil out in the heat. (20:12) Nevertheless, their expectation of preferential treatment is groundless, because they had bargained with the vineyard's owner for a denarius, and a denarius is all they really earned. If pay must be based on a rule of earning or merit, this is all they legally or morally deserved, so **they likewise received every man a denarius.**

Not unlike Peter (19:27), these are disciples who drive a bargain with God. Their theology is a typically human one that expects God to reward seniority and show preferences on the basis of lifelong faithfulness, as if He owed something special to those who work long and hard doing their duty. They tend to rankle when God gladly welcomes with equal generosity even those who could not possibly have served so long as they. Naturally, they resent the idea that sinners and other unworthy, unqualified people should be welcomed by God on an equal footing with them who spend a lifetime of hard struggle against temptation. To them, this is unfair: it completely reverses their theology of righteousness. To them, Jesus can hobnob with sinners if He likes, but He has no right to treat them as if they had earned what it has taken the "righteous" many years of hard striving to attain!

20:11, 12 **And when they received it, they murmured against the householder.** They protest as if they were being handled with irresponsibility and injustice. Their complaint about the generosity of their employer completely forgets their contract bargaining of the morning.

1. **These last have spent but one hour**, i.e. they had worked from 5:00 p.m. until 6:00. On this basis, since pay must be regulated by the amount of work done, they do not deserve what they receive, yet they are paid a full day's work.
2. **(We) have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.** These men have undoubtedly put in a hard day working in summertime temperatures around 30°C (86°F) to as high as 45°C (113°F) in some zones. (Cf. references to Palestinian heat and its effects: Gen. 18:1; 1 Sa. 11:11; 2 Sa. 4:5ff; Isa. 25:4f; 49:10; Ps. 91:1; 121:5f; Rev. 7:16; Jas. 1:11; Lk. 12:55) Much depends, as usual, on seasonal variables and geographical location, altitude and humidity.

Rand-McNally (*Bible Atlas*, 36) measures the average temperatures at 34°C (90°F) and 39°C (103°F) respectively, although Thomson (*Land and Book*, II, 77) measured 38°C (100°F) at *midnight* when encamped at Tiberias even in March. In April he experienced intolerable heat over the Mediterranean. (*ibid.*, 312)

The protestors had worked hard for about twelve hours in these conditions.

Their conclusion is, "Despite these gross differences in our performance, **you have made them equal to us.**" **You** is probably addressed to **the householder** who is standing nearby watching the payline move forward as each receives his pay. Their grumbling smacks of the same jealousy of the prodigal son's self-righteous elder brother. (Lk. 15:25-32) Unsatisfied with their pay, they are envious because of their unjustified expectations for themselves and because of the bounty given to "the undeserving." Their objection is based on the principle of Jesus' story: they who expected to be first and highest paid last in order and least in their own expectations. In terms of the sum paid for actual work done, the owner of the vineyard had not actually **made them equal unto** those who had worked all day. In reality, he had made them far superior, since all those who were called later were given what it had taken the others all day to earn. The superiority of grace for all without distinction of merit is a major point in the story's application.

In the application, this jealousy of religious status based on human effort or initiative will be shown for the worthless enterprise it is. **You have made them equal to us**, means, "Does it mean nothing to you that we have earned our goodness by \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)?" Men are forever filling in that blank with "good works," "circumcision," "being a male (a female)," "being a Jew (or Gentile)," "being free (or slave)," "rich (or poor)," "going to church every Sunday for the past 50 years," "tithing," "raising up my children right despite great handicaps and at great sacrifice," etc. Our greatest difficulty lies in our inability to admit the fact that in Christ religious achievements or status mean nothing as a means of exchange for our salvation. What is so shocking is that these things are simply irrelevant to the question. What really counts is doing what God wants, motivated by trust and because we want to express to Him our love. (Gal. 5:6; 6:15; 1 Co. 7:19)

The murmuring of these workers does not, as such, prove that they represent someone who finally will be cast out of the vineyard, as if even disciples could never murmur against the decisions of God they find unpleasant for themselves or judge to be wrong. The Apostles themselves had been tempted to talk this way. Rather, it is quite likely that Jesus' inclusion of the murmuring strictly warns every disciple of the injustice done by all pretenses against God's grace. He intends thereby to eliminate all sense of claim on our part. Even if some, at judgment, take the remonstrating attitude of these complainers, He is perfectly capable of giving them the salary they think

they earned without robbing anyone else or satisfying the grumblers' demands for extra rewards.

4. The Lord of the Vineyard answers: (20:13-15)

a. "There is no injustice involved in paying you all you bargained for!"  
(20:13)

20:13 **But he answered and said to one of them** who perhaps had made himself spokesman for the others. **Friend** (*hetaïre*) is a general, kindly form of address to a person whose name is not known. (Arndt-Gingrich, 134), "comrade, buddy, associate" (Rocci, 776). Contrary to Lenski's opinion (citing Trench, *Matthew*, 776), *hetaïre*, in its only other appearances as an address in Matthew, is always a friendly correction expressed in a brotherly spirit (cf. 22:12; 26:50). As here, the speaker in all three cases has been offended by something in the conduct of the person so addressed. True, it introduces a remonstrance, but this does not make it a "word of evil omen," since the thing objected to in the other's conduct stands in striking contrast to the speaker's kindness toward the offender. It is truer to say: "We are friends, buddies, companions—and you conduct yourself this way with me?!" Its use in these texts draws special attention to an undeniable friendship that should have rendered impossible the unbrotherly conduct to which objection is made.

**I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a shilling?** These men had demanded justice both when they made their contract and now when they demand equitable payment on the basis of merit relative to those who actually earned so little but were paid a handsome bonus. They wanted justice, so they got nothing but justice. They just did not receive mercy. If they condemn grace shown to others, it cannot, in justice, be shown to them. (Cf. notes on 18:23-35) Theirs was a strictly mercenary, contractual relationship with the owner. They would have held him to the legal terms of their stipulation, had he tried to pay them less than the agreed sum. But when he correctly honors his contract with them, they inconsiderately grumble because he had not also been generous, since he gave them no bonus besides! If they stand to lose, they are legalists, but if they stand to gain, they want grace and generosity! Bruce (*Training*, 267) calls such hireling servants of God

Calculating and self-complacent . . . ever studious of their own interest, taking care even in their religion to make a sure bargain for themselves, and trust little to the free grace and unfettered generosity of the great Lord.

**I do thee no wrong** means that God violates none of our rights when He does good to our neighbor. He takes nothing from us when He graces others with distinctions we do not receive. There is no injustice done, except in our own unjustified self-esteem. Because grace gives what is not earned, it seems an injustice only to those who do not understand grace. But to condemn another's grace as unjust is to insult him who shows it and is the quickest way to lose the mercy he would have shown the critic.

So saying, Jesus deals a deathblow to the whole Judaistic scheme of merit and reward and any other systems like it. Every specific agreement will be correctly honored, but everyone will receive payment appropriate to the kind of faith shown in the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord. The lesson is that **WAGES**, measured on a strict ratio between labor and payment, are an unsatisfactory basis upon which to expect God's blessing, whereas **REWARDS**, contrary to earthly criteria but based on the goodness of the Master and calculated according to one's awareness of unworthiness and lack of claim upon Him, are most satisfying of all. This is one of the striking paradoxes of Christianity: the man who works for rewards never receives them, but he who works for the joy of service with no thought of reward, is always rewarded by God.

b. "I can do what I want to with my possessions.  
What business is that of yours?" (20:14, 15a)

20:14 **Take up that which is thine, and go thy way. That which is thine:** "You earned it, but only that: take it and leave." The denarius for this man was no reward; just the payment of a debt incurred. (Ro. 4:4) Those hired first got only what they bargained for; no more. Note the biting contrast between **that which is thine** and "what belongs to me" (20:15a). The landlord and the day laborer are both free to decide what they shall do about their own possessions. The latter had earned his denarius and so was free to take it home and spend it as HE desired. On what basis, then, could he legitimately deny that same right to the landlord? He had blundered in not

admitting the other's right to dispose of his own property as he chose.

**It is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee.** There is no compulsion, no wage-claim against the Lord which forces him to pay the late-comers a given amount. To those who were hired from 9:00 to 3:00, he had promised only "what is right," a commitment that left the payoff to his own discretion. The last hired had not even this much of a promise. Therefore, whatever he gave them above and beyond the calculated fraction of a day's wage would not be due wages, but a free gift of grace. (Ro. 4:4-6; 11:6) **It is my will** (*thélo* = "I choose") establishes the sovereignty of God's choices without reference to human expectations and pretensions. (Cf. Ro. 9:18f; 11)

It is in this anti-legalistic standpoint that the non-Judaistic character of this Jewish Gospel is seen most clearly.

**Go thy way:** should we think of this order as the Lord's rejecting these complainers who, because of their bad spirit, should be excluded from the class of the saved? Plummer (*Matthew*, 274) works on the problem this way:

It has been objected that the murmurers are not punished for their murmuring; they receive only a gentle remonstrance, and get their pay just as the others do. But is a rebuke from Him nothing? And, although He inflicts no punishment, yet there is the punishment which they inflict upon themselves. They get the reward that was promised them; but they have lost the power of enjoying it. The discontented are never happy, and jealousy is one of the worst of torments. Heaven is no heaven to those who lack the heavenly temper; and these murmurers will have no pleasure in their reward, until they accept it with thankfulness. From this point of view the first and the last *may* be said to have changed places. Those who came first to the vineyard had the least joy, and those who came last had the most joy, in the reward given to all.

**20:15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?** There is a touch of irony in this question, because the grumblers are appealing to a law of merit as they urge that they should be paid more. The lord promptly answers their unjustified appeal to the law of his conscience by appealing to the law of property rights. Every denarius in his possession, except those which they had just earned and which he has now paid off in full according to the legal agreement, is his own. What legal right had they to dictate to him how he may or may not dispose of his possessions as he pleases. So, he

is just in justifying him who has faith in his (seemingly) arbitrary way of treating his workers. (Cf. Ro. 3:26)

c. "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (20:15b)

**Or is thine eye evil?** = "Are you jealous?" (See on 15:19.) However, Prov. 23:6-8; 28:22 and Dt. 15:9 suggest that "evil eye" includes "greediness, covetousness and calculating selfishness." See these texts in versions where the idiom "evil eye" is retained in the translation. **Because I am good**, generous or liberal. Have these complainers any legal right or justifiable motive for their ingratitude that he should have been considerate and generous with their own fellow-workers? The late-comer is as needy as any other worker. Is there no neighborliness in the early worker that would gladden his heart to see his hungry fellow's need for a day's work had been met as well as his own? In fact, the lord of the vineyard did not have to hire the complainers first. He could have hired others first. It was by grace that any of them were hired at all. So we see that everything depends on the merciful generosity of God from start to finish.

Surprisingly, even jealousy can be a motive that spurs one to change his mind and return to right thinking. (Study Ro. 10:19; 11:11, 14.) Jesus deliberately organized the payoff in this story to show the fallacy of the calculating self-righteous expectations of those who think they deserve more and better than others. But their jealousy stirs them to ask the questions that bring out the truth that men's blessing and joy in the Kingdom of God depends, not on their striving and worth, but on God.

Their jealousy exposes their lack of sensitivity to the community: they are unwilling to rejoice that the Lord bestowed such gracious benefits on undeserving men at all. They were unwilling to see that the landlord's graciousness took care of definite needs of members of their own community: their own neighbors, the worried wives and hungry children of these workers had now been cared for. They were criticizing the right-minded, sovereign judgment of the one in position to help their community's needs. This is real shortsightedness.

B. GENERAL PRINCIPLE TAUGHT: Human expectations are likely to be overturned by God's free, generous decision. (20:16)

20:16 **So the last shall be first, and the first last.** What at first appears to be a harmless little tag line on a nice story is really a multiple warhead nuclear missile which, though launched once, may be directed to strike many targets!

1. In the Kingdom of God, **God** is first, not last. He who has been left out of consideration in all human effort to be good enough to earn enough to put Him in debt, is actually the most important consideration. It is **HE** who makes the **last first and the first last**. God's sovereign right over His possessions guarantees Him the right to distribute His goods as He chooses. This will have pointed significance when the Lord must correct the wrong-headed ambitions of James and John who try to put themselves first and thrust all others into last place in their thinking. He must warn them all again to put themselves last, because it is God who assigns the first places: it is **HE** who is the owner of the vineyard. (20:23, 26f) Everything depends upon His wisdom and grace.
2. Similarly Jesus Himself, who would be despised and rejected by men, would come from *last* place in human estimations of His person and program, to be *first* and greatest of all, seated on the throne of His glory to judge all mankind. The greatest Servant shall be the Master and Ruler of all, a theme more fully developed in 20:26-28. It is His word and example of self-giving service that is the standard by which relative rewards of the Kingdom are to be dispensed. Our *first*-ness or *last*-ness depends upon our bowing to Jesus' rule by our sincere assenting to His judgment of our unfitness, by our readiness to take every opportunity to serve others as only our loving duty to Him, and by our leaving every decision about rewards to His discretion.
3. This is the conclusion to Peter's question, "We have left everything and followed you: what shall we have?" Coming in the general context of the rich young ruler's desire to earn eternal life by doing one supremely meritorious deed (19:16, 27), Jesus' warning admonishes the disciples the kind of spirit that would hold God to exact wage contracts based on "so much wage for so much work," so much righteousness, qualification, worthiness, seniority, etc., in exchange for so much glory. The Apostles would be assigned positions of importance and responsibility in

the Kingdom (19:28), true enough, but such rewarding would have little to do with special personal merits, since others, less blessed with the opportunities enjoyed by the Twelve, would be recipients of God's goodness too. (19:29) The Twelve's judging Israel would not hinder the saints from judging the world and angels. (1 Co. 6:2f) Being first to possess the keys of the Kingdom and open its doors to Jew and Gentile, does not put Peter on a seniority list for preferential treatment ahead of all the other Apostles and common disciples who, too, will proclaim the Gospel to Jew and Gentile alike! (See on 16:18f; 18:18f; 28:18f.) This is the kind of thinking that gives meaning to the priority of publicans and prostitutes ahead of "the pure and perfect." (Mt. 21:31f; Lk. 7:29f) Other parables taught this same truth. (Cf. Lk. 14:21-24; Mt. 21:33—22:14) No one seemed more "last" than Zacchaeus, and yet our Lord gave him the same promise He held out for everyone. (Lk. 19:1-10) This public thief, the chief tax collector, made a thief's restitution (cf. Ex. 22:1; Lk. 19:8) and turned 50% of his holdings into instant cash for the underprivileged, and this lost man was found, and he who was denied access to synagogues was proclaimed a "son of Abraham!"

4. Since Jesus has every intention of calling Gentiles into the Kingdom and blessing them on exactly the same terms as the Jews, even though there is not one word of this in this parable, He has laid down a principle here that must necessarily undermine any Jewish jealousy of their prior rights or prestigious position. (Ac. 13:46; Ro. 1:16; 2:9-11; cf. Lk. 13:22-30; Mt. 8:10-12) Greatness or importance in the Kingdom is just not based on the undisputed seniority of one's Jewishness, but upon anyone's accepting the call of God, submission to God, humble service to others, gratitude for anything received and his usefulness in helping others. (20:26-28; 18:1-20; Ro. 2; 3:9; 10:12; Gal. 3:28; 5:6; 6:15; Col. 3:11; Ac. 10:34-36; 1 Co. 7:19)
5. Here is promise for you and me: although we just came on the scene, looking for work in Christ's Kingdom, we need not despair of His gracious blessing for us too, merely because we are late to arrive in the King's vineyard.

If it be surprising that Jesus should be describing a situation likely to occur often among hard-working, self-denying people who make great sacrifices for God and His Kingdom, consider Bruce's explanation (*Training*, 268ff): the vice of self-righteousness is a live possibility.

1. when the self-denying spirit is not really a habitual way of thinking and acting, but rather a sporadic manifestation interspersed with longer periods of self-indulgence that needs to be justified by reminders of the merit of the past sacrifices.
2. when any given kind of ministry in the Kingdom comes to be highly honored because of its being in great demand, and so an opportunity for spectacular self-abnegation.
3. when self-sacrificing is organized into a sterile ritual and observed ascetically for the sake of the glory that accrues to the disciple rather than to the Lord.

To Bruce's analysis we might add

4. and, in the case of the Apostles, when their own seniority in the faith come to be regarded by them as particularly meritorious, deserving preferential treatment because of their sacrifices.

The point of Jesus' teaching, then, if expressed as an order, would be: "Do not serve in the Kingdom as mercenaries presumptuously calculating the earnings you think you merit on the basis of your own minor accomplishments. Otherwise, in your self-esteem, you will find yourselves dealt with according to the same cold, legalistic treatment due those who insist on contracts with God and work only after receiving specific guarantees. Serve, rather, saying, 'We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty' (Lk. 17:10), trusting in the grace of your Lord, thinking of Him as One with whom you need no carefully stipulated contracts to protect yourselves. This way, although you consider yourselves unworthy to be treated as anything but one of the hired servants (Lk. 15:19), you will find yourselves warmly welcomed as sons of the Lord."

It misses the point to think that, in the distribution of rewards, there will be no distinction made between the first and last, because, although the laborers all received the same monetary pay in the story, nevertheless, in proportion to the work done and their attitude shown, they were not at all treated equally. In fact, the trusting, generous late-comers were treated far better than the calculating grumblers. The Lord's grace and generosity will be shown to His servants in every age who give Him all they have without precise contracts to protect themselves. God will always keep His word, but, for those who trust Him, He enjoys doing better than He promised.

Are the *last* in or out of God's Kingdom? Since the point of view of this parable is not merely the Church, but God's rule over men

in general, there is no time at which these workers leave the Kingdom or control of the King once they have begun to work for Him. Thus, even if the grumbling legalists who insult God's grace end up in hell, they are still within God's domain and under His rule, although terribly last and finally lost. The fact that Jesus did not define the denarius specifically in His story leaves us to understand Him to mean that the denarius is what anyone is to receive from God, our pay.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. What contextual signposts point to the proper interpretation of this illustration?
2. State what Jesus considers the main point of His story.
3. What local customs of Jesus' day must be known to appreciate the householder's hiring and pay practices? What is meant by "early in the morning," "the third hour," "the sixth, ninth and eleventh" hours? How much is a denarius worth in our money? Who in our society gets the equivalent of a denarius a day?
4. What is the ground of the complaint of the grumblers? What motivates them to complain?
5. What are the kind, cheerful answers of the householder to the complainers?
6. What texts in Matthew 18 find practical application in this section?

### Section 51

#### JESUS PREDICTS HIS SUFFERING A FOURTH TIME

(Parallels: Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34)

TEXT: 20:17-19

17 And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples apart, and on the way he said unto them, 18 Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests and scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, 19 and shall deliver him unto the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify: and the third day he shall be raised up.