

## The Parable of the Workers in Vineyard. Matthew 20. 1-16. Part 2.

### SCRIPTURE

Jesus said to them, ‘... But **many who are first will be last, and the last first.**

‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.

‘Now when he had agreed with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

‘And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you”. So, they went.

‘Again, he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise.

‘And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, “Why have you been standing here idle all day?” They said to him, “Because no one hired us”. He said to them, “You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive”.

‘So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, “Call the labourers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first”.

‘And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius.

‘And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, “These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day”.

‘But he answered one of them and said, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?”

‘So, **the last will be first, and the first last**’.

Matthew 19. 30 – Matthew 20. 16 (*The New King James Version*)

### INTRODUCTION

We concluded Part 1 by considering the grumbling protest registered against the vineyard owner by those workers who had laboured for a whole day. The basis of their complaint was that they had been paid no more than those who had laboured for only one hour.

### EXPOSITION (continued)

**Verse 13.** ‘He answered one of them’. It is worth noting that, like the twelve disciples, the workers who had begun at six o’clock in the morning had a spokesman. ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong’, the vineyard owner insisted. The word translated ‘friend’ signifies ‘companion’, ‘associate’, ‘comrade’<sup>1</sup> and word differs from that used, for example, by our Lord to describe the brother of Martha and Mary at Bethany: ‘Lazarus our friend sleeps’.<sup>2</sup>

In reply, the vineyard owner appealed to the sum specified in the contract. ‘I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ It has been well said, ‘Their complaint ... was patiently heard by the master; yet he did not take back his decision. For having agreed to work for a denarius, the men could not legally demand more, nor complain if others received more’.<sup>3</sup>

The vineyard owner 'reminds them of the agreement which they had all accepted and which he had fully kept'.<sup>4</sup> In effect, the owner was saying, 'You ask for what you deserve, and that I have given you. You appeal for justice, and by justice shall your mouth be shut'.<sup>5</sup>

**Verse 14.** 'Take what is yours', the master added, suggesting that those who were paid last had either refused to accept the single denarius or had handed it back. And, again, we must stress that a denarius was a very fair—even a generous—day's wage for a vineyard worker.<sup>6</sup>

This vineyard owner was certainly not being tight-fisted or stingy. The fact he chose to give proportionately more to other workers simply demonstrated his liberality and open-handedness. Essentially the man was saying, 'To **you** I am **fair and just**; to **them** I am **generous and good**'.

**Verse 15.** 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?' This links back to the owner's words in verse 14; 'Take what is yours and go your way'.

His point was simple: 'The denarius which you earned is now yours. You are free to use it as you will. I do not presume to tell you what you may do with it. But equally, I am free to do as I will with those things which belong to me'.

And it is important to note that the master insisted that his money and possessions were his 'own', not as an excuse for greed and self-indulgence but as justification for his generosity.<sup>7</sup>

'Is your eye evil, because I am good?' Note the deliberate play on the words 'evil' and 'good'.<sup>8</sup> As I understand it, biblically to have 'an evil eye' signifies, not so much (as is often said), to be envious,<sup>9</sup> as to be covetous and grudging.

We can easily capture the flavour of the expression from the following scriptures:

(i) 'Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, "The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand", and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing';<sup>10</sup>

(ii) 'A man with an evil eye hastens after riches';<sup>11</sup> and

(iii) by way of contrast, 'He who has a generous eye (literally, 'a good eye') will be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor'.<sup>12</sup>

Somebody with an 'eye' which is 'evil' is, therefore, covetous, selfish, greedy and ungenerous.<sup>13</sup>

**Verse 16.** 'So', Jesus concludes, 'the last will be first, and the first last'.<sup>14</sup> There you have it then!

## INTERPRETATION

Having listened to the Lord's parable, we now understand who are meant by the 'first' and by the 'last', and are therefore in a position to interpret the sayings of chapter 19 verse 30 and chapter 20 verse 16.<sup>15</sup>

We know that **those who began first and who were paid last** (that is, the 'first' who became 'last') in reality **fares the worst**. For their reward was proportionately smaller than the reward of those who began last but who were paid first (that is, the 'last' who became 'first').

**Those who began 'first' were the bargainers of verse 2.** We recall that the owner 'agreed' their wage with them before sending them into the vineyard. This group were of a mercenary spirit and a calculating frame of mind, as is evident from both (i) their

'agreeing' the terms of their employment at the beginning and (ii) their complaining about their earnings at the end.

These were the men who worked only because they had a clearly defined contract—the men who wanted to know in advance what they would get for the service they rendered.

**Those who began 'last' were the trusting souls of verse 7.** We recall that the owner simply 'said' to them.

This group were the men who were prepared to trust entirely to his goodness. These were the men who simply got on with the work, willing to leave the question of any reward entirely to the master.

And, as we have seen, with 'the first' group the vineyard owner showed himself just, but with 'the last' group he showed himself generous.

And so, **the bargainers ended up last in the queue where effectively the greater rewards were handed out first.**

From our Lord's saying, therefore, as explained by His parable, we detect a gentle (but firm) rebuke of Peter's question back in chapter 19 verse 27.

The twelve had wanted to know the fine detail of what they would receive as a result of their sacrifice and service for Christ. And, by means of His saying and parable, the Lord pointed out to them that this wasn't a spiritually healthy question.

This is why the whole section begins with the 'But' of chapter 19 verse 30. For Peter's question ('what shall we have?') put the relation between the Lord and His servants on an altogether wrong footing. It exposed a faulty attitude to their service for the Master, and His saying and associated parable were intended to nip this 'evil in the bud'.<sup>16</sup>

The Lord made it clear that those who are prepared to labour for the sake of the work and for the sake of Him who called them to it (to get on, that is, with serving Him for higher and better motives) will benefit most.

For, in His eyes, a little done in the spirit of love, devotion and trust is better by far than much done in the spirit of the hireling, even if His servant is concerned with the benefit to be gained in the next world rather than in the present world.

## **APPLICATION**

### **(i) No higher service.**

Service for the Lord Jesus is always a privilege. There is nothing higher!

The New Testament writers James and Jude were our Lord's brothers according to the flesh.<sup>17</sup> It is most striking therefore that, in the epistles which bear their names, neither James nor Jude staked any claim to a special earthly relationship to Jesus. They were both content to be known simply as His servants: 'James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ', and 'Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James'.<sup>18</sup>

The same high estimation of the Lord's service is evident in the Old Testament. When Tattenai, the governor of the Persian province west of the Euphrates River, asked the Jews to provide him with their Temple building permit and with the names of the chief men responsible for the rebuilding of the Temple, the only answer he received to this second request was, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth'.<sup>19</sup> To such men there was no more to be said. They carried no higher title for the simple reason that there was no higher service.

## **(ii) The promise of reward: an encouragement.**

Yet, because sometimes the way is hard, the difficulties are great and the obstacles many, for the encouragement of His people, God graciously promises them rewards.

(i) 'My beloved brethren', *Paul* wrote, 'be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord'.<sup>20</sup>

(ii) 'God is not unjust', *the writer to the Hebrews* assured his suffering readers, 'to forget your work and labour of love which you have shown toward His name'.<sup>21</sup>

(iii) Addressing elders, the apostle *Peter* exhorted, 'Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown<sup>22</sup> of glory that does not fade away'.<sup>23</sup>

(iv) And, for his part, the apostle *John* recorded the words of the Lord Jesus, 'Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown<sup>24</sup> of life ... Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with me'.<sup>25</sup>

Yes, it is wonderfully true that, in effect, the Lord still encourages His servants in the same words as Azariah the prophet once addressed to King Asa, 'Be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded!'<sup>26</sup>

## **(iii) The higher motive.**

But the fault of the apostles on whose behalf Peter spoke lay in that they had focussed their minds on the detail (on 'the fine-print') of their reward. There was a very real danger that reward had ceased to be an encouragement in their service and had become the motive and mainspring of their service. It has been well said that, 'God called us to play the game, not to keep the score'!<sup>27</sup>

When writing in the context of the judgement seat of Christ, the apostle Paul makes it clear that it was the love of Christ and not the prospect of reward which constrained him.<sup>28</sup> And, whereas it is undoubtedly true that 'the fundamental thought here must be that of *Christ's love for us*', which 'sets in motion such behaviour as Paul's',<sup>29</sup> that very love surely inspired *Paul's love for Him*.

And even though, as we have seen above, Peter encouraged elders to 'shepherd' the Lord's flock<sup>30</sup> by giving them the assurance of an unfading crown of glory when 'the Chief Shepherd' appears,<sup>31</sup> he had learnt long since, from the 'Chief Shepherd' Himself, that ultimately it was love for Him, the Lord Jesus, which was to motivate and inspire men to 'shepherd' His sheep.<sup>32</sup>

## **THE SEQUEL**

Following the parable (itself sandwiched between the two versions of our Lord's sayings about the 'first' and the 'last'), the Saviour proceeded to foretell His passion.<sup>33</sup> Although this was His third prediction of His forthcoming passion,<sup>34</sup> it was the first time He revealed the mode of His death; namely, by crucifixion.

### **(i) James, John and Salome.**

It was 'Then', we read, that 'the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him'.<sup>35</sup>

According to chapter 27, 'the mother of Zebedee's sons' was one of those present when the Lord was crucified: 'many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, among whom were Mary

Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, *and the mother of Zebedee's sons*'.<sup>36</sup>

It is clear from the parallel account in Mark's gospel that this lady's name was 'Salome': 'There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, *and Salome*, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee'.<sup>37</sup>

A comparison of these references with the list of the women who 'stood by the cross of Jesus' in John's gospel suggests strongly she was the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus; 'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and *His mother's sister*, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene'.<sup>38</sup>

It is most likely therefore that, humanly speaking, 'the mother of Zebedee's sons' was our Lord's aunt and that they ('James and John'<sup>39</sup>) were His cousins.<sup>40</sup>

### **(ii) The request.**

Salome's request was simple, 'Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right hand and the other on the left, in your kingdom'.<sup>41</sup> Salome had come, we note, 'with her sons',<sup>42</sup> and, according to Mark's account of this incident, James and John approached Jesus with the same request.<sup>43</sup> Clearly, all three asked the great favour; in Mark's gospel, the sons are in the foreground; in Matthew's, the mother.<sup>44</sup>

James and John coveted specially reserved seats in our Lord's kingdom. They wanted His assurance that, in His 'glory', they would sit, one on His right hand, and one on His left.<sup>45</sup>

What they had in mind can be illustrated from the account which Flavius Josephus gives of the court of King Saul: 'the king ... came to supper; and ... there sat by him his son Jonathan on his right hand, and Abner, the captain of his host, on the other hand'.<sup>46</sup> And I note that, not only was Jonathan Saul's son, but Abner was Saul's cousin.<sup>47</sup> That is, Saul had allocated the chief places in his kingdom to members of his immediate family. A little later, David had followed suit, allocating positions of prominence to his nephews, Joab and Abishai.<sup>48</sup> Salome and her sons could therefore point to good historical precedent for what they sought.

### **(iii) Missing the point.**

It is evident that all three had not only had failed to register the significance of the Lord's third prediction of His passion but had completely missed the point of our Lord's saying and parable.

For there can be no doubt that James and John had in their minds the Saviour's earlier promise that they (along, of course, with the other apostles) would one day 'sit' on thrones 'in the regeneration'.<sup>49</sup> But the brothers weren't satisfied with the prospect of sitting on just any 'thrones' then; they wanted to 'sit' on His right hand and on His left hand, in the places of special honour.

It seems clear that, in their eyes at the time, the Lord Jesus was 'going up to Jerusalem',<sup>50</sup> not, as He declared, to suffer and to die but to be enthroned and crowned King. And they therefore made their play in advance for the most important seats in His administration.

Little did they realize that, in less than two weeks' time, ***Jerusalem would hold for Him, not a royal crown, but a crown of thorns!***

Little did they realize that ***those who would then be at His 'right hand' and His 'left hand'*** would not be sitting on two thrones on either side of His throne; they ***would be hanging on two crosses***, 'crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left'.<sup>51</sup>

And, indeed, 'the mother of Zebedee's sons', who now requested that our Lord 'command' that her sons be granted places at His right hand and His left, would then be there to witness the sight.<sup>52</sup> Did she at Golgotha recall, I wonder, her ill-advised request?<sup>53</sup>

It is only too evident that, by referring back to our Lord's earlier pledge about sitting on thrones in His kingdom, neither Salome nor her sons had really heard, still less understood, the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

**(iii) What of you and me?**

And the key issue as we conclude our study is. 'Have we?'

May we, in response to the Saviour's unbounded love for us, love Him ardently and (encouraged by the prospect of reward) express that love in serving Him faithfully and fervently.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See W. E. VINE, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, article 'FRIEND. 2. *hetairos*'.

'Matthew is the only New Testament writer to use *etairov*. He does so three times (Matt. 20. 13; 22. 12; 26. 50), and always in the form of an address ... It always denotes a mutually binding relation between the speaker and the hearer which the latter has disregarded and scorned', K. H. RENGSTORF, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, article *etairov*.

'In each case' there is 'the implication of a distinct relationship in which there is generosity on the one part and abuse of it on the other', Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament - Abridged in One Volume*, article *hetairos*.

We should note, in particular, that this word was not (as was the word in John 11. 11) a term of affection, endearment or intimacy. When, therefore, the Lord Jesus addressed Judas by this word, He was not being insincere.

<sup>2</sup> John 11. 11.

<sup>3</sup> H. B. SWETE, *Parables of the Kingdom*, page 100.

<sup>4</sup> C. L. MITTON, *The Expository Times*, Vol. 77, No. 10, page 307.

<sup>5</sup> Some have compared and contrasted a similar parable (including several more-or-less identical phrases) recorded in the Jewish Talmud in connection with the eulogy given at the funeral of a distinguished young Hebrew scholar: 'To what can Rabbi Abun bar Hiyya be likened? To a king who hired many workers; and there was one worker who was exceptionally productive in his work. What did the king do? ... In the evening the workers came to receive their wages and he gave him his total wages with them. The workers complained and said, we were toiling the entire day and this one did toil only for two hours and he gave him his total wages with us! The king told them, This one produced in Torah in twenty-eight years what an outstanding student cannot learn in an hundred years'.

[This is HEINRICH WALTER GUGGENHEIMER's translation of the Zeraim Tractate Berakhot in his scholarly work '*The Jerusalem Talmud*', published by Walter de Gruyter in 2006, pages 243-244.]

This Talmud parable is cited, among others, by JOHN LIGHTFOOT, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* on Matthew 20. 1; R. C. TRENCH, *ibid.*, page 183 footnote 1, and JEREMIAS, *Rediscovering the Parables*, page 138. But there is a striking contrast between the words which our Lord put into the mouth of the vineyard owner and the application of the Talmud parable.

There is no suggestion whatever in our Lord's parable that the late-starters worked any harder than those who had toiled all day. The rabbinic parable has nothing therefore to teach us about the meaning of our Lord's parable.

<sup>6</sup> See Note 40 in Part 1.

<sup>7</sup> 'The labourers who were engaged last show nothing to warrant a claim to a full day's wages; that they receive it is entirely due to the goodness of their employer', JEREMIAS, *op. cit.*, page 139. The vineyard owner's words, 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?' are 'used to excuse not selfishness, but generosity', C. L. MITTON, *op. cit.*, Vol. 77, No. 10, page 308.

<sup>8</sup> Sadly, this point is obscured by the NIV, NASB and the ESV, along with many other translations and paraphrases.

<sup>9</sup> Still less does it refer, as the unbelieving world around sometimes takes it to refer, to any supposed power of causing harm to somebody by simply looking at him or her.

<sup>10</sup> Deut. 15. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Prov. 28. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Prov. 22. 9.

<sup>13</sup> The Jewish Mishnah says, 'The person with a good eye gave the fortieth part of the first fruit of the heave offering for the maintaining of the priests, while the person with the evil eye gave only a sixtieth' (Terumoth 4. 3), and that 'he that gives, but wants a monopoly on giving and does not want others to be able to give too is considered to have an evil eye' (Avot 5. 15). Again, it is clear that the 'good eye' means someone who is a generous giver and the 'bad eye' means someone who is stingy.

<sup>14</sup> The earliest manuscripts omit the sentence, 'For many are called, but few are chosen'. The addition of these words by some later copyist (as in the text underlying the KJV and NKJV) serves only to cloud the meaning of the parable. It is likely that the sentence was added by a scribe familiar with the close of the Parable of the Marriage of the King's Son, to which the sentence is a fitting conclusion, Matt. 22. 14; compare 'many are *called*' there with 'sent out his servants to *call* those who were invited', Matt. 22. 3.

<sup>15</sup> 'The meaning is not: "the last as the first, and the first as the last, all treated alike". True, all get the same sum; at least the last and first do, nothing being said of those between; but the point of the parable is not that the reward is the same', A. B. BRUCE, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, on Matt. 20. 16.

<sup>16</sup> See R. C. TRENCH, *op. cit.*, pages 173-174.

<sup>17</sup> See Mark 6. 3; John 7. 5; Acts 1. 14; 1 Corinthians 9. 5; 15. 7; Galatians 1. 19. In all probability 'the brothers of the Lord' were the natural sons of the marriage of Joseph and Mary, born of Mary sometime later than our Lord. See C. F. HOGG and W. E. VINE, *Galatians*, on Galatians 1. 19; JOHN EADIE, *Commentary on the Greek Text of Galatians*; and J. B. MAYOR, 'Brethren of the Lord' in *Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible*.

'This refers to Mary's other children', G. D. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, page 403.

This understanding stands in contrast to the view that they were the children of Joseph 'by a former wife'; expressed, for example, by J. B. LIGHTFOOT in his dissertation, 'The Brethren of the Lord', appended to his commentary on *Galatians*.

<sup>18</sup> Jas. 1. 1; Jude 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ezra 5. 6-11.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor. 15. 58.

<sup>21</sup> Heb. 6. 10; cf. Heb. 10. 34; 13. 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> This word 'crown' ('στέφανος') signifies the victor's wreath or garland of the Greek games, and not the kingly, diadem-type of crown ('διάδημα').

<sup>23</sup> 1 Pet. 5. 1-4.

<sup>24</sup> See note 22 above.

<sup>25</sup> Rev. 2. 10; 22. 12.

<sup>26</sup> 2 Chron. 15. 7.

<sup>27</sup> VANCE HAVNER, quoted by WARREN WIERSBE, *Be courageous*, page 38.

<sup>28</sup> 2 Cor. 5. 14; cf. v. 10.

<sup>29</sup> C. K. BARRETT, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, page 169.

<sup>30</sup> Compare Paul's, 'take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God', Acts 20. 28.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Pet. 5. 1-4.

<sup>32</sup> John 21. 16, where the word translated 'feed' (KJV) or 'tend' (NKJV) is the very same word as that translated 'shepherd' in 1 Pet. 5. 2 (NKJV). In effect, the Lord Jesus was saying to Peter, 'if you love me, love my sheep'.

And, in the full knowledge of the apostle's genuine love and affection for Him, 'the very thing Christ loves most on this earth He trusts to this man', J. N. DARBY, *Collected Writings*, volume 26, page 291.



<sup>33</sup> Matt. 20. 17-19.

<sup>34</sup> Compare Matt. 16. 21-23; 17. 22-23.

<sup>35</sup> Matt. 20. 20. Compare the 'then' ('τότε') which introduced Peter's question, Matt. 19. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Matt. 27. 55-56.

<sup>37</sup> Mark 15. 40-41.

<sup>38</sup> John 19. 25.

<sup>39</sup> Mark 10. 35.

<sup>40</sup> This close earthly relationship would explain, in part at least, why it was that our Lord later committed the care of His mother to John ('the disciple whom he loved'), John 19. 26-27. (One reason He bypassed His brothers according to the flesh may have been because, at that point, they did not 'believe in Him', John 7. 5, coming to faith only consequent on His resurrection, Acts 1. 14; 1 Cor. 9. 5; 15. 7.)

These circumstances may also help explain why Salome wasn't present with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph to witness the burial of our Lord's body, Mark 15. 47—whereas she was present both at the cross itself, Mark 15. 40, and when the women came to anoint our Lord's body with spices on the first day of the week, Mark 16. 1. It is at least possible that Salome left the scene of the crucifixion 'that hour' along with John and our Lord's mother, John 19. 27, and stayed with her sister for the remainder of that day.

<sup>41</sup> Matt. 20. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Matt. 20. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Mark 10. 35-37.

<sup>44</sup> It is quite possible that James and John had enlisted the help of their mother because they thought this would increase their chances of having their request granted in that she was Jesus' aunt.

<sup>45</sup> Mark 10. 37.

<sup>46</sup> FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VI, Chapter XI, paragraph 9.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Sam. 9. 1; 14. 50-51.

<sup>48</sup> 1 Chron. 2. 16-17 with 2 Sam. 8. 16; 18. 2. David was the youngest of Jesse's seven sons and quite likely many years younger than his sister, Zeruiah, Jesse's daughter. The sons of Zeruiah, David's nephews, may well therefore have been near his own age. Compare also the statement in 1 Chronicles 18. 17 about David's sons.

<sup>49</sup> Matt. 19. 28.

<sup>50</sup> Matt. 20. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Matt. 27. 38.

<sup>52</sup> Matt. 27. 56; John 19. 25.

<sup>53</sup> This is one of the very few occasions when the Lord Jesus refused to grant a request made to Him; cf. Matt. 16. 1, 4; Mark 5. 18-19.