

SEPTUAGESIMA

70 days before Easter

Study Notes for the Christian Layperson

by: Rev. Andrew Richard



MATTHEW 20:1–16 ESV

Author and Date:

Matthew Levi the apostle around AD 50. This parable is only found in the Gospel according to Matthew. In context it appears immediately before Jesus foretells his death for the third time, and not long before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

¹ [Jesus said,] “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

- Jesus continues the agricultural parables that he began in Matthew 13. In the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23) Jesus distinguished between types of soil. In the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) Jesus distinguished between the wheat and the weeds. In the present parable Jesus shows an apparent distinction between the laborers. The owner of the vineyard in this parable is the sower in the previous two: Jesus Himself. The vineyard is the Church as She exists in the world.
- The parable starts with the master of the house who “went out.” The kingdom of heaven doesn’t come to us apart from Jesus coming to us, leaving the heavenly vineyard and coming into the world’s marketplace where we were lost in sin, calling us into His Church.
- “Kingdom” might better be translated “reign.” When we think of a kingdom we think of castle and a moat and banners. A reign, however, is an action: it’s verbal in nature, it’s someone *doing* something – it’s *Jesus* doing something. It’s like the explanation of the Second Petition in the Small Catechism: “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father

gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.” Or in other words, the reign of heaven is nothing else than we confess in the Creed.

- “Hire” implies wages paid for work done; wages are earned. As we’ll see, the reign of heaven is not like a bunch of people who earn their way: the reign of heaven is like the whole parable.
- ² “After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.”
 - A denarius was standard pay for one day’s work.
 - “What does laboring in the vineyard of the Lord mean? Nothing other than that each does his duty in his vocation in faith and in love according to God’s Word and instruction, – not what seems good to him, but what is right and Christian. But just as the labor in a physical vineyard consists of various tasks, one hoeing and rooting, another planting, a third watering the vines, a fourth pruning the branches, a fifth doing yet another thing, so in the church also there are many offices and calling.” (Johann Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, 91)
 - ³ “And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵ So they went.”
 - The third hour was about 9:00 a.m.
 - The owner doesn’t name the wage they’ll be paid, just that it will be “right.”

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“Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing.

- The sixth hour is about noon; the ninth, about 3:00 p.m.; the eleventh, about 5:00 p.m.

“And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’

- Idleness characterizes life in the world. No one loves the neighbor or lifts a finger for anything other than gratifying the sinful flesh.
- “No one has hired us” may be those who had never heard the Gospel of Christ. They may also be those who had hardened their hearts against it previously, but this time the Holy Spirit granted them faith. These had, after all, been standing there all day as the master of the house came with his call of the Gospel, but only now are they given ears to hear.

⁸ “And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’

- The foreman could be the angels who gather the wheat into the barn (Matthew 13:30).
- “Beginning with the last” foreshadows the ending of the parable.

⁹ “And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius.

- Those who started work at 5:00 p.m. and worked one hour are paid a whole day’s wage.

¹⁰ “Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

- The first don’t talk about their vocations (the active work in the vineyard) but what they’ve suffered (the passive work). They’ve had the devil at their back, the world tempting them to all sorts of sins and vices and persecuting them without cause, the sinful flesh about their necks with its selfish and unclean desires. They have borne these things, and they don’t complain about the active work nor the passive work.

They complain of the *equality* of the kingdom of heaven. Yet we are all equal in that no matter how much we do or suffer it isn’t enough to earn a speck of sawdust from our Lord. We are all equal in what we receive from Him. And Jesus is the one who did the real work: who planted the vineyard, who sent out the Gospel as a seed to found His Church; He’s the one who bore the burden of our sin and the scorching heat of God’s wrath on the cross.

- These laborers commit the grave sin of standing before Jesus and saying, “Look what I’ve done.” The proper response is that of the tax collector in the temple: to beat one’s breast and say, “God, atone for me, a sinner.”

¹³ “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?’ ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?”

- The entire life of the King who brings the reign of heaven could be summed up with the words He says here: “I want to give.” Even though He “hired” laborers for His vineyard, they don’t receive because *they earn*, but because *Jesus gives*.

¹⁶ “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

- Not because they change places, but because Jesus treats them as equals. Having a “first” and “last” requires degrees based on individual accomplishments. Eliminating first and last makes everyone in the vineyard alike a receiver of God’s grace in Christ – He’s the one who has accomplished it all. The most important thing you do in the Church is not your vocation, it’s not bearing your cross: it’s receiving grace from the nail-pierced hand of Jesus. We don’t boast of our works, but simply say we have done our duty and are just as dependent on Christ as everyone else in the Church, no matter when the Master of the house called them.



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