

Pentecost XVIII: Matthew 20:1-16: The Basis on Which God Deals with Us

1. Ylvisaker writes: "This parable presents many difficulties, and there is an almost endless array of interpretations. But the greatest obstacles result from a disregard of the conception which underlies the structure of this parable, which is indicated, however, by the Saviour Himself both at the beginning and at its close." True. In general, Lenski's interpretation is not recommended. Hendriksen rightly takes Lenski to task on a number of points. Lenski obscures the point of comparison by allegorizing.
2. Before you begin work on this text, carefully read 19:16-30. A rich young man approached Jesus. His selfrighteousness is very apparent in vs. 20. But his total lack of understanding of salvation by grace through faith is also very apparent in vs. 21. His riches meant everything to him. And he did not want to use his money in the interest of others. Therefore he left in sorrow (vs. 22). Jesus' observation in vss. 23-24 applies not only to the wealthy but also to the poor who trust in riches and things, to the exclusion of the righteousness of God by faith in Christ. In vs. 25 the disciples ask "Who, then, can be saved?" The "who" includes themselves. They are astounded. And so are we. The words of Jesus in 23-24 are stark Law. The flesh loves to trust in things, money, self. Jesus' answer in vs. 26 covers all instances. Salvation is impossible with men and possible only with God, for with Him ALL things, even the salvation of the soul, are possible. The salvation of the individual soul is a mighty and gracious act of God.
3. In vs. 27 Peter makes a statement and then asks a question. In both he is comparing himself and the disciples with the rich young man who had just left in sorrow. "What, then, shall be to US?" Jesus' answer in vss. 28-29 is a remarkable promise. He is speaking of true followers of Jesus. *παλιγγενεσία*, unlike Tit. 3:5, is eschatological, when there will be the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1). The words "for my name's sake" in vs. 29 are very important. Not for his own sake, but for Jesus' sake, which denotes true repentance and faith as opposed to the selfishness and workrighteousness of the rich young man. The word *ἐκατονταπλάσιον*, "immeasurably more", applies both to this life, but especially to eternal life, as Jesus plainly states, but it is by inheritance, which means that it is not earned. Then comes the warning in vs. 30: "Many first will be last and last first." Peter's statement and question in vs. 27 is fraught with danger. When we compare ourselves with others, the flesh becomes active and selfrighteous thoughts influence our thinking. Look at Gal. 6:1-5, especially vss. 3-5. By testing himself constantly, and that immediately involves contrition over sin, and by trusting in the merits of Christ alone, the Christian will have boasting in himself alone BUT NOT TOWARD ANOTHER PERSON. Then follows vs. 5: "You see, each one will bear his own burden", the responsible burden of repentance and faith. Mt. 19:30 is both warning and promise. The "first" are like the rich young man, Peter, and all who in their selfrighteousness, consider themselves better than others. The "last" listen to vs. 26, do not murmur in envy and jealousy, speak as did the publican in Lk. 18:13, listen to II Cor. 12:9, and, therefore, by the grace of God in Christ are considered "first". And now follows the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, an elucidation of Mt. 19:30, which is restated at 20:16.
4. Vs. 1: In order to avoid the so-called difficulties of this parable and to keep from getting entangled in what Ylvisaker calls "the endless array of interpretations", it is suggested that the preacher first read the parable at Lk. 17:7-10. Jesus Himself explains. Even if we would do everything that He has commanded (and we don't), we must declare ourselves unprofitable servants. We've only done our duty, what God rightly demands, and which doing is not meritorious. It is also suggested that the preacher read hymn #373 in *TLH*. Now back to vs. 1. The chapter division obscures the fact that the *ὄρα*, "you see", points back immediately to vs. 30. The whole parable explains that one sentence. "The Kingdom of Heaven" here is the Kingdom of grace, the visible church on earth, which will be

consummated in the Kingdom of glory, vs. 8. It must be stated here that Jesus is not speaking of the kingdom of power. All ideas of labor and management or of capital and labor must be laid aside. Jesus is plainly speaking of how He deals with members of the church, among whom are hypocrites. ἄνθρωπος is pleonastic from the English point of view but not from the Greek point of view. οἰκοδεσπότη is variously translated "a landowner", "the owner of an estate", "the owner of a vineyard". "Who went out at dawn to hire workers for his vineyard" shows that he, and he alone, took the initiative. Synergism is eliminated.

5. Vs. 2: These notes do not agree with those interpreters who say that this vs. clearly shows the mercenary spirit of those hired. It merely stresses the fact that the workers clearly understood the arrangement. ἐκ δηνάρτου is genitive of price. τὴν ἡμέραν is accusative of extent. ἀπέστειλεν, as always, means "to send with a commission". It must be stressed that, at this point, the workers do not object or murmur as they do later. In application the word "denarius" means the same as θησαυρός, 19:21 and 29b: "immeasurably more and will inherit eternal life". In application, the δηνάριον denotes God's abundant and generous grace. In Greek a δηνάριον denotes day's wage but the application is quite different. Jesus said: "The Kingdom of heaven is like" not "the same".
6. Vs. 3: Another group is engaged at 9 a.m. The point of this vs. is that the landowner alone takes the initiative. Note ἐξεληθῶν and εἶδεν. They were ἄγροος idle, unoccupied. The words ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ reinforce the idleness. Like today when people do nothing but sit around in a pool-hall or a tavern, completely unoccupied. Synergism is eliminated.
7. Vs. 4: The first part of this vs. again shows that the landowner takes the initiative. The last part of the vs. clearly shows the justice of the wage. In form it is a FMV conditional relative sentence, assuring them that they will not be cheated.
8. Vs. 5: They complied immediately. Then the landowner again takes the initiative and hires idle people at noon and at three p.m.
9. Vs. 6: This vs. introduces an element of utter surprise. Note that this time, unlike in vs. 3 and 5, the article is used with ὥραν. The landowner take the initiative and hires men at about five p.m., unheard of, and purposely so, for Jesus is speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of grace on earth. ὅλην τὴν ἡμέραν accusative of extent, means "the day in its entirety". ἄργος comes at the end of the sentence with emphasis, a predicate adjective.
10. Vs. 7: Note juxtaposition of subject and object "Nobody us has hired." This answer does not denote irreverence but simply brings out their helplessness. But the landowner, in his utter generosity, takes the initiative, engages their services. The variant "And whatever is just, you will receive," is implicit in this vs.
11. Vs. 8: The first three words are a genitive absolute denoting time. We agree with Bengel: "A prophetic allusion is made to the Last Judgment. The evening of each individual's life resembles the evening of the world." Now the οἰκοδεσπότης (vs. 1) is called ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος, translated almost unanimously by modern translators as "the owner of the vineyard" but the translation of AV "the lord of the vineyard" clearly indicates that Jesus is beginning to make application, God Himself. ἐπίτροπος is variously translated as "steward, foreman, manager, paymaster and bailiff." These notes do not recommend that ὁ κύριος denote the Father, and ὁ ἐπίτροπος the Son. As Hendriksen points out, the ἐπίτροπος is mentioned only here. The point is rather that the οἰκοδεσπότης is quite wealthy and that all do his bidding. "Call the workers and pay the wage that is due them" means that

the will of the owner is supreme and that he alone takes the initiative. "Beginning from the last to the first" is wholly unexpected. In the kingdom of power, under the ordinary circumstances of labor and management, this would be unheard of and unfair. Fahling says: "This was a necessary part of the parable, because, as afterwards appears, here is where the complications begin. The order was strange, but still stranger was the payment." Stoeckhardt: "Ordinarily employers pay their workers according to the services rendered. . . . But the owner of the vineyard did not follow this rule." Hendriksen: "Clearly this surprising order is in harmony with the rule laid down in (19:30 and) 20:16: the last are going to be first, and the first last." This is Law, not Gospel. The flesh responds to this order by saying: "Lord, that is unfair!" Faith is Christ responds by saying: "By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless!"

12. Vs. 9: From this point on the parable dwells deliberately only on the last and the first. Note that vss. 9 and 10 begin in the same way. They did not come forward until they were called, which, in application denotes the Judgment. Note that the subjects in both vss. 9 and 10 are elliptical, but maybe that is deliberately done. "The first" had been promised a definite wage. "Those about the eleventh hour" had simply been told to go into the vineyard. But both are treated exactly the same. $\kappa\alpha\iota$ is the distributive use of this preposition. We must change the construction: "A denarius each."

13. Vs. 10: It is remarkable that only the last and the first are stressed. Why, then, did Jesus, in the parable, mention also those hired at 9, 12 and 3, without mentioning them in application? Fahling disposes of it by saying: "Nothing is said about the intermediates." Ylvisaker does not mention it. Stoeckhardt alludes to it: "Others have remained idle many hours of the day, much of their life was wasted on vanity, and only later came to repentance, allowing themselves only a little time to show proofs of their repentance," but he may be referring to those engaged at the eleventh hour. Bengel says: "The intermediate labourers did not murmur; for they saw themselves also made equal to the first. He who is liable to be envied himself, is less likely to envy others." But that leaves something to be desired. Hendriksen says: "Nothing is said about those who had been hired at 9, noon, and 3. We may assume that they are satisfied--perhaps even more than satisfied--with what they receive. But they are no longer mentioned." And Lenski: "It was not necessary to bring in the other three groups. In a case such as this the most obvious is chosen." Perhaps Jesus added the three intermediate groups to complete the illustration, but not to be stressed in application. That may not satisfy, but it's the best we can do. $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\theta\iota\mu\iota\sigma\sigma\alpha\nu$ is variously translated "they supposed", "they thought", "they expected", "they assumed". Does that mean that they were of this opinion. Or does it mean that they began thinking thus only when they compared themselves with others? There was full agreement when they were hired. They worked very hard. They did not murmur when hired. Furthermore, does $\pi\lambda\epsilon\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$ mean "more than those hired last" or "more than they had agreed upon"? We shall come to that in vss. 11 and 12. The second $\kappa\alpha\iota$ in vs. 10 means "and yet" or "but" and $\acute{\alpha}\nu\kappa$ is again distributive, just as in vs. 9. The third $\kappa\alpha\iota$ is plainly "also". No distinction is made. $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\omicron\varsigma$, the subject coming at the end, is quite emphatic.

14. Vs. 11: $\lambda\alpha\beta\acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\epsilon\varsigma$ "after they had received" in both illustration and application, but the application in vs. 14 spells out actually what they received. $\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\acute{\omicron}\gamma\upsilon\zeta\omicron\nu$ is ingressive imperfect "they began to grumble". $\kappa\alpha\tau\acute{\alpha}$ denotes opposition "against". Rather than being cheerfully grateful, they are grumblingly resentful. The verb $\gamma\omicron\gamma\upsilon\zeta\omicron$ (an onomatopoeia) is found here, Lk. 5:30; Jn. 6:41.43.61; 7:32 and I Cor. 10:10. We summarize: It is used of the envious, the selfrighteous, the rejecters, and those who lose their souls. Never is it used of repentant sinners. In illustration the laborers begin grumbling only when they see that those hired last receive the same wage. In application this ought not be limited to Judgment Day. The instances of grumbling noted in the passages from Lk. 5:20 to I Cor. 10:10 are examples of grumblers in this life. What Jesus intends is for us to examine ourselves

now, lest we lose our souls in the Great Judgment. He is warning Peter and all Christians about grumbling now. Furthermore, the parable should not be applied literally only to people who have been Christians all their life as opposed to those who become Christians in their dying hour. He is speaking about an attitude, an attitude of selfrighteousness, of invidious comparisons, with other Christians.

15. Vs. 12: λέγοντες denotes means or manner. The grumbling came out in their words. οὗτοι is derogatory. They despise "these last". καὶ is "but". "Equal to us you made them." This is stronger than saying: "Equal to them you made us." βασιτάσασσι is a substantial participle in apposition to ἡμῖν. The translations are interesting. Only AV and NKJV are the same. We list the other eight: RSV: "the burden of the day and the scorching heat"; TEV: "a whole day's work in the hot sun"; NIV: "the burden of the word and the heat of the day"; JB: "a heavy day's work in all the heat"; NEB: "sweated the whole day long in the blazing sun"; AAT: "worked hard all day in the blazing sun"; NASB: "the burden and the scorching heat of the day"; LB: "worked all day in the scorching heat". Life is not easy. Bengel remarks: "'Burden' internally, 'heat' externally." And note that Jesus does not deny that. But He does deny subsequently that it is a basis for merit, for more pay, for envy of others. Fahling: "A man who insists upon right before God loses grace and receives judgment." Ylvisaker: "The person who is not satisfied, who comes in the spirit of pharisaic selfrighteousness, demanding his legal rights, will fall short of the reward." Stoeckhardt: "Among those who have worked the longest we find many proud and conceited persons, who rely on their long hours of work in the church and despise those who have worked but little, who insist on their rights, and are offended at the grace and goodness of God." It is an ever-present danger. To demand more and better, annihilates the faith relationship. And to base it, furthermore, on one's own amount of work, suffering and toil, is disastrous.
16. Vs. 13: Note that the κύριος individualizes "to one of them". αὐτῶν is partitive. He addressed all but we must hear the Word individually. Ἐταῖρε "friend". Bengel: "At first sight a friendly word but it assumes a more solemn aspect when we recollect that it is used in 22:12 to the guest who had not the wedding garment and in 26:50 by our Lord to Judas." Lenski: "Trench is on the right track when he calls this a word of evil omen and points to 22:12 and 26:50." οὐκ ἀδικῶ σε is likely litotes for "I treat you most generously." The assessment of the κύριος is utterly opposite that of the grumbler. οὐχὶ introduces a question which demands the answer "yes". δηνάρου is genitive of price (cf. vs. 2). Assuming that our reading is correct (see apparatus), this vs. proves that the agreement in vs. 2 was mutual. There can be no agreement unless it be mutual. This rhetorical question involves simple logic.
17. Vs. 14: "Take yours and be gone!" denotes total rejection, damnation. In application it means that life eternal is lost. Lenski says: "He is treated exactly as the hypocrites are who are mentioned in Mt. 6:2.5. They have received their reward." In that passage Jesus says that the works of the hypocrites get an earthly reward, but there it stops. Is Jesus saying that here in 20:14? We leave it unanswered. "I will to give to this last one as also to you," meaning as a gift, based on grace, not on merit. Bengel says: "The force of the word θέλω is very great, denoting the absolute freedom of God's grace. . . . The expression 'to this last' is repeated from the speech of the murmurer, but used in the singular number and applied to the last of the last. Everyone who is envious, envies someone individually. ὡς καὶ σοί, the addition 'who has borne the burden and heat of the day' is not repeated."
18. Vs. 15: Another οὐκ question, demanding the answer "yes". This question implies that the murmurer was putting his own judgment above that of the κύριος. The translations are rightly unanimous in treating ἐν τοῖς ἑμοῖς as neuter, "with my own money", "with what is mine". This question implies that the murmurer arrogated to himself the position of owning and disbursing the money. And now

a third question. The first one (vs. 13) was based on simple logic. The second (vs. 15) was an οὐκ question which demanded the right answer. This third question is the most searching and condemning of all. The translations are interesting. AV and NKJV: "Is thine (your) eye evil, because I am good?" LB: "Should you be angry because I am kind?" RSV: "Do you begrudge my generosity?" TEV and AAT: "Are you jealous because I am generous?" NIV: "Are you envious because I am generous?" JB: "Why be envious because I am generous?" The ὅτι is simply astounding. The generosity, kindness, grace and goodness of the κύριος causes them to be envious, to be hateful toward "the last". Nothing could be more perverted. The fault lies not with the grace of God, but wholly with the envious person. Fahling says: "Since in the Lord's kingdom work is our duty and grace our reward, there should be neither envy in our hearts with respect to those who are received into the heavenly kingdom although they came to Christ only in the eleventh hour, while we have served Him all our lives, nor a gainseeking exhibition of our good works before God. The attainment of salvation is the same for both saint and sinner." And Ylvisaker: "Many may have been true followers of Jesus, who shall likewise forfeit the eternal inheritance; they have not kept the grateful, humble, and childlike spirit which is mindful of its own unworthiness. They fell by the wayside, not in gross error and unbelief, but in the more subtle sin of selfrighteousness. Their position among men may have been an enviable one, they have been regarded, possibly, as lights or as examples for worthy emulation, now they are assigned to a place in the night of eternity. May God preserve us all in His grace!" Envy or jealousy, that is nurtured and not repented of, leads to eternal disaster.

19. Vs. 16: Here Jesus makes application with the word Οὕτως, "likewise". οἱ ἔσχατοι are the enduring repentant sinners. οἱ πρῶτοι are those, although knowing better, who fell prey to envy, unbelief, hypocrisy, and comparison with others. Peter was warned and so are we.