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JUST WHAT DID JESUS HIMSELF SAY?

PARADIGM: MATTHEW 20:1-16

THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

by

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JUST WHAT DID JESUS HIMSELF SAY?

Paradigm: Matthew 20:1-16

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

Prefatory Remarks

The aim of this presentation is to indicate what happens when some of the major presuppositions of the historical critical method are applied to an analysis of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. We shall attempt to reveal the exegetical consequences that follow from the pursuit of truth by means of the application of the principles of scientific historical investigation to a given Biblical text. Three major considerations will receive some rather detailed treatment, namely text, interpretation, and assumptions.

Let us keep in mind that the text of Matthew 20:1-16 as we have it is the source of meaning and authority for us. In determining the significance of this pericope we engage in a study of its words, its concepts, its grammar and syntax, its context, both the immediate one as well as the remote one, and its structure. We note particularly that this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven. It is a story to tell us what happens when God is at work to re-establish His rule of grace within and among men. We are accustomed to proceed on the assumption that the point of this parable is determined by analyzing the text as we have it before us in Matthew's gospel.

But if one uses the historical critical method that conviction is not good enough, since the understanding of truth in our scientific day is different from that of the evangelist and of the early church. "History yields truth," say the practitioners of the historical critical method. We must get behind the text to determine as precisely as possible just exactly what it was that Jesus said and in what circumstances He told this parable. If we can determine the "Sitz im Leben Jesu" (the setting in Jesus' life), then we are in touch with the ipsissima verba Jesu (the very words of Jesus). The latter are authoritative because they will be historically true in the sense that they correspond to the facts of His earthly ministry. Whatever else there is in the text is interpretation; and that is part of the structure. It may and even must be stripped away to get at the solid truth of Jesus' work and words.

It is of paramount importance to realize that, in the understanding of truth as operative in the historical critical method, the meaning of a text as given in the Gospels is not necessarily a binding item. It may be no more than the opinion of the evangelist or of the primitive church. If so, it is no more authoritative than the view held by anyone else of what Jesus really said. Never mind that Matthew was an evangelist! He could be very wrong in his understanding of one of Jesus' parables, as he was when he wrote down this parable. That is precisely what Erich Klostermann says in his commentary on Matthew as given in Handbuch zum Neuen Testament. Here is how he puts it: "Hence he [Matthew] must have erroneously regarded the point of the parable to be the secondary feature of 8b."¹ Jesus originally told the parable to an audience consisting of His enemies. Matthew changed that by inserting the parable in a Marcan context (10:17-31) whose subject is a question raised by Peter, speaking for all the disciples.

Behind that kind of observation lies the assumption that Matthew had before him, as he wrote, two major documents as his major sources, namely Mark and a compilation of Jesus' sayings called "Q" (the first letter of the German word "Quelle", source). The latter is thought to have consisted of material found in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark. Since this parable does not occur in Luke, it cannot have come from Q. Hence it is Matthew's own, which he may have taken from some oral tradition available to him at the time of writing.

Let me hasten to add that these assumptions on sources are understood to be very hypothetical. To date, they seem to offer the best working solution to the puzzling question as to why there are so many similarities in the synoptics and yet such astounding divergences. The source-hypothesis is mentioned here because it is part of the method by which it is thought possible to get behind the canonical text to the original setting of a parable in Jesus' earthly ministry.

¹"Er [Matthaeus] muss also irr hmlich die Pointe der Parabel in dem Nebenzug 8b...gesehen haben." Erich Klostermann, Das Matthaeus Evangelium (T bingen: Mohr, 1927), p. 159.

Let us now see how one goes about trying to get back to the "Sitz im Leben Jesu." For our model we shall use the treatment of this parable as given in Joachim Jeremias' The Parables of Jesus.² The title of this work is of interest all by itself; it contains the broad hint that this work is devoted to the task of determining just what it was that Jesus said when He told parables: their setting, their purpose, and their wording during the course of His earthly ministry.

Jeremias is not a radical critic. He does not want to do violence to Jesus' words and works. On the contrary, he proposes to look beyond the interpretation of these parables, as given in the words of the evangelist, to the way Jesus told them in the actual setting of His ministry. This kind of analysis is motivated by the conviction that the church, including the apostles and evangelists, sometimes offered a meaning for the words of Jesus which distorted or at least re-oriented His original intent. So, for example, Matthew gives us an interpretation of the Parable of the Tares Among the Wheat which misses the point, turning a call for patience into eschatological reflections (J.J. p. 81).

We proceed, then, to follow Jeremias' analysis step by step for the purpose of evaluating the results of this particular method.

A Translation

It will be helpful quickly to run through a translation of the text. As we do so, let us keep in mind a succinct Latin saying on parabolic speech: "Non in una persona sed in tota actione collatio consistit." This means that the relationship between the two levels of a parable is to be found in the description of the total action and not just in reference to a single person.

Applying that observation here it means that the kingdom of heaven is not just like the householder who is mentioned, but it is like what happens when he goes out to engage workers and then pays them all the same, starting with the last ones, regardless of the number of hours each group worked in the vineyard.

Hence the first sentence should read: "With the kingdom of the heavens it is the case as with a householder, who went out at dawn to hire workers for his vineyard." That is the way we shall keep it and so proceed to the rest of the translation.

After coming to an agreement with the workmen on a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.

Then about the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the village square without a job. So he said to them, "You go into my vineyard, too, and I'll give you whatever is fair." So they went.

Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hours and did the same. Now, about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around. So he says to them, "Why do you stand here all day with nothing to do?" They respond by saying to him, "Because nobody hired us." Says he to them, "You, too, go to the vineyard."

When evening came, the master of the vineyard says to the caretaker, "Summon the workmen and pay them their wage, beginning with the last unto the first."

Now, when those from the eleventh hour came they each received a denarius. So when the first one approached, they figured that they would receive more: but these, too, got a denarius apiece. And when they got it they started grumbling against the master of the house, saying, "These last ones worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who did the heavy work of the day and stood the midday heat."

By way of reply he said to one of them, "Friend, I'm not doing you an injustice. Didn't I agree with you on a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this last man just as much as to you. Haven't I the right to do what I wish in affairs that are mine? Or is your eye evil (envious) because I am generous?"

In this way the last shall be first and the first last.

²Joachim Jeremias, The Parable of Jesus (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 33 ff. and 136 ff. Hereafter cited as J. J.

Textual Criticism

The translation of this parable offered above does not include the words at the end, "For many are called but few are chosen." The Authorized Version contains this statement. Some recent translations omit it for the simple reason that the manuscript evidence is less than decisive: the better texts omit the passage.

It is said that the statement is out of place, since it does not relate at all to the parable, which, to be sure, tells of various groups being invited (called) to go and work in the vineyard; but there is no hint of a selection made from those called at various hours. They all stayed there; and all were paid.

The saying about many being invited and only a few being chosen got into the text, it has been surmised, by some unthinking scribe, either as a homiletical gloss or because the first-last saying seemed to call for this extension by what has been called a floating logion (saying) from the lips of Jesus.

We ought not accept such a conclusion too quickly as "gospel truth," so to speak. It is just possible that the verb hypagein in verse 14 is to be understood to imply rejection as it does in Matthew 4:10, where Jesus used it to order Satan to be gone. In that case, those who were called into the vineyard first, as represented by the "friend" to whom the caretaker was talking, were excluded from further consideration and so were not chosen because of their attitude and response. In that case, one of the points of the parable would be that persons called to serve in the Lord's vineyard will forfeit their privileged status if they operate on the principle of strict justice rather than of grace.

It is on the basis of manuscript evidence that the saying was left out of our translation. This is a matter of textual criticism, which is sometimes called "lower" criticism to make the point that its interests are different from those of "higher" or historical criticism. The latter consists of applying the principles of scientific historical investigation to the study of a Biblical text with a view to determining the "historical" ingredients which may be in the text itself or in the process by which the text became what it is. On what is "historical" and can be so validated is considered authoritative; the rest is interpretation and may be dispensed as not of primary consideration.

Framework

As we keep in mind our primary purpose of noting the consequences which flow from applying the method of historical criticism, let us next have a look at the framework in which this parable occurs.

According to the way the verses and chapters are divided in our copies of the Scriptures, this parable starts with a new chapter. It is unfortunate that there should be this break between chapters 19 and 20; for the present parable connects directly with the last verse of chapter 19: "Now, many firsts shall be last and lasts first." In fact, the parable is part of the answer to Peter's question in 19:27: ". . . Look, we forsook all things and followed you. What then, shall we have?" Jesus answered Peter very directly.

The Gospel according to St. Mark also offers that reply, consisting of the promise that the disciples will receive many blessings, including the gift of eternal life, for having chosen to follow Jesus. At that point Mark, too, has the statement about firsts being last and lasts first. But Mark goes on from there with a general statement about Jesus being on His way to Jerusalem and predicting His passion and resurrection. Matthew, instead, introduces the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, or, as it has also been called, of the Good Employer, or the Generous Householder. At the end, the first-last saying is introduced once more but in reverse order. In this latter sequence it is found also in Luke 13:30, but in quite a different context.

The framework, then, within which the parable occurs has been created by the saying about firsts being last and the lasts first. That raises a very important question: "Is the context of this parable a literary creation or did Jesus, in His earthly ministry, tell this parable right after Peter had asked the question, 'What shall we have?'"

Jeremias believes that the immediate context of the parable is a literary one. "he has inserted into a Marcan context the parable of the 'first' (Matthew 20:8, 10) and 'last' (Matthew 20:8, 12, 14) in order to illustrate the saying in Mark 10:31 (par. Matthew 19:30 (J. J. p. 34))."

This is a matter of crucial significance. For, if the sequence is a literary one, then it is not historical. We cannot, therefore, say that, in the course of His earthly ministry, Jesus answered Peter's

question with a direct response and then told the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. The presence and use of this parable is part of the structure created by Matthew. In a correct interpretation of it, therefore, the exegete is free to dismantle the context and ask, "What did Jesus really say when He told this parable?" and "Under what circumstances did He say what He said?" Unless the exact historical context can be established, Matthew's version of the parable belongs to his understanding and interpretation of what Jesus said; hence it is not necessarily binding on the twentieth century reader and hearer. Strictly speaking it is not true because the text, as it is given, does not tell us exactly what Jesus said.

We must be clear on the point that is being made. Involved here is an assumption about the nature of truth itself. The text of the parable is a primary source for what Matthew understood Jesus to have said; it is only secondary for the historical issue of just what it was that Jesus said. Quite probably, according to Jeremias, Jesus did not tell this parable at all within the context given in Matthew. He probably told it, to be sure, in some form, but to an audience consisting of His opponents rather than of His disciples (J. J. p. 38).

At the moment we shall put this item into a state of suspension and move on. Later on we shall come back to it.

Textual Matters

Before going on with exegetical considerations of a general nature, it will prove of value to take up individual items in the text itself. In this way we shall get a more thorough grasp of the issues involved in our analysis of the historical critical method. On the way to our conclusions, furthermore, we may reach a deepened understanding of this parable.

The "for" (γάρ) of verse one points back to the previous passage (19:30) which, in turn, relates to Peter's self-complacent question of 19:27: "What shall we get for having left everything and followed you, Lord?" In the logical sequence of things, the "for" statement precedes the previous sentence.

In the present instance, for example, the story given in the parable logically precedes the principle stated in the words, "Many firsts shall be last and lasts first." Keeping this sequence in mind will help in the interpretation; for the parable depicts an instance of how people who are first manage to become last by their grumbling against a generous householder.

In this same verse the term ἀνθρώπος (man) occurs before the word for householder. The same combination is found at 13:52 and 21:33. Some ancient manuscripts also have the word "man" before the term for "merchant" (ἐμπόρος) in 13:45. The reason for the combination is probably that of underlining the incredible paradox that the kingdom of heaven may be like something a man does -- in this case a householder, who is later (v. 8) referred to as "the lord of the vineyard," a combination to remind us that κύριος (lord) can be sued of both God and man. In Matthew 10:25 κύριος and οἰκοδεσπότης are both applied by Jesus to Himself. In other words, both are kingdom terms.

In v. 2 τὴν ἡμέραν is the accusative of duration. For doing a whole day's work, the laborers and the householder agreed on a denarius as pay. The denarius, a Roman dime worth some 20¢, was a normal day's wage for a day laborer. A problem arises how to translate this term so as to convert it into a contemporary equivalent. Goodspeed used the word "dollar"; the AV has "penny"; the RSV uses denarius; Today's English Version has "the regular wage" (Good News For Modern Man). The NEB does the word by saying "the usual day's wage." That is probably the best way to render it; for that's how the term denarius was understood in the days of our Lord.

V. 3. "The third hour" is the time from 8 to 9 in the morning. The work day began at dawn and ended at sunset. It was divided into twelve hours. The exact time according to our clocks would vary somewhat according to the season of the year.

People are said to be standing in the marketplace (village square) at this hour. Quite possibly we are to think of ἐστῶτες in its reduced sense of being there, just as at the beginning of Matthew 13 the crowds are described as standing on the shore when Jesus taught them while sitting in a boat. It is more likely that persons without a job would sit somewhere in the marketplace and gossip.

V. 4. καὶ ὑμεῖς - "You, too!" The need was there; these new workmen may not have known what had taken place. The expression reflects the need and mood of the master.

V. 4 - In this instance the owner of the vineyard agreed to pay the men whatever was fair. There was no bargaining, only a promise to pay what was just. These men probably thought this would amount to a part

of a denarius. There was in fact such a thing as the 12th part of a denarius. It was called a pondion. As the parable indicates, however, there is no twelfth part of God's grace!

The δὲ at the beginning of v. 6 sets this last group off as noteworthy. They are the last to be hired. Those who were engaged at the 6th and 9th hours are just mentioned in passing. The truth of the parable turns on the first and the last. Those brought in at 9 A.M. are distinguished from the others by the master's explicit promise that he would treat them fairly. It is said that the householder did the same in the instances of those who were hired at noon and at 3 o'clock. This is a way of underlining a key concept of the parable: δίκαιος, just and right. At the end of v. 7 some few manuscripts have the words, "And you will receive whatever is right." These words occur in the AV because they are part of what is known as the Received Text, which was used by the "learned men" who did the King James translation. There is not much solid textual evidence for the addition.

Jeremias calls attention to the fact that the excuse "because no one hired us" conceals the characteristic indifference of orientals (J. J. p. 137). It was an Old Testament principle that a laborer be paid his wage on the same day (Lev. 19:13; Dt. 24:14f). In fact, a workman had a right to ask for his pay before sunset. The instructions, therefore, in v. 8 to the caretaker that he pay the wage alerts the reader to the possibility that something unusual is about to take place.

Jeremias spends some time to argue that the expression ἀρροῦντες ἐνὶ τῷ ἔργῳ means "not omitting the last ones," or "including those who are last." But since the clause goes on to say ἐν τῷ πρῶτῳ we shall do better to take the word ἀρροῦντες literally and conclude that the sequence from last to first is important for the story. As we shall see, it is the generous treatment of the last that exhibits the first ones for what they really are: they fail to grasp the concept of grace.

The ἀνὰ of v. 9 is distributive. It means that each one of those who started working at five o'clock received one denarius just like the ones who had worked all day.

The straight future of ἔρχομαι in v. 10 is of interest. It reproduces in the third person plural what these first ones said to each other in the first person: "We are going to get more." But they too got, we read, τὸ ἓν ἀνὰ ἑκάστην, meaning "this business of one denarius per person."

We must note how the intermediate groups are passed over in silence. Only the first are mentioned as figuring that they would get more than the last. This, then, is a parable about first-lasts and lasts-first!

At this point the householder himself was not present, presumably. So the noisy complaints of the first are verbally directed against the lord of the vineyard represented in the person of the caretaker. They keep up their grumbling; that is what the imperfect ᾤοντο of v. 11 signifies. They would not stop their murmuring.

ᾤοντο is a kingdom term. It is used of the Israelites complaining in the desert against God's ways. The scribes and Pharisees grumbled when Jesus ate with publicans and sinners. Here the first to work in the vineyard grumble. They get some of the last - οὐρα! - to come with them as they enter their complaint for being wronged twice over: a) they worked for 12 whole hours, while the last ones worked for just one; b) they had to endure the heat of the day, while the others worked in the cool of the evening. Justice demands that they receive more than a denarius.

In v. 13, the caretaker selects one of the grumblers, the loudest one, perhaps, to say, "Friend, I am not doing you wrong." The word ταῖς - which Jesus used as he turned to Judas in the garden - is a term of both friendliness and reproach. In both other places, where the word occurs in Matthew (22:12 and 26:50), the person addressed was in the wrong. That is certainly the case here. This man completely misunderstood the nature of the householder's action. The latter could honestly say, "I am not cheating you." He had agreed on a denarius; and that is what he got. It was his. The caretaker told him to take it and leave. ὑπάγειν means "to be gone"; "to get under way." In vss. 4 and 7 it is used by the householder to order the workers to the vineyard out of his presence.

The grumblers, of course, have no place to go. They have done their work and received their pay. So what the caretaker is telling them means, "You have no more business here! You have been given what is just. Grace you do not want - especially for others - so be gone!"

The ἐγὼ of V. 14 is a verb which states a firm decision. It means, "I am determined to pay both the last and you the same." It is a term of authority. Bengel in Gnomon refers to it as summa huius verbi potestas - "the fullest authority of this word." It is a kingdom word, manifesting the will of the One who is busy re-establishing His rule over and among men.

V. 15 - ἐν τῷ ἑαυτοῦ means "with what is mine." Jeremias tries to make a distinction here between the instrumental "with what is my own" and the local "on my own estate" (J. J. p. 137). But such sharp

distinctions do not always work that neatly in actual usage. To his mother and foster-father the 12-year old Jesus at the temple said, "Did you not know that I must be ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου (Luke 2:50) -- in the things of my Father?" It is obvious from the context that this means more than being in the temple. It included the things that went on there, such as His discussion with men learned in Scripture. So here, in the parable, the caretaker, speaking for the master of the vineyard, is saying that he has the authority not only to act as he wishes on his own estate but also that he has the right to dispose in matters that are his, in this instance, the matters of hiring and the paying.

Bengel once observed that envy does not want more for itself but less for others. The firsts of this parable grumble because the last got a whole denarius per person for an hour's work. They disguised their reaction by stressing their performance all day long. Like the older son in the story of the prodigal they pout and call attention to their hard work. They exhibit a crass kind of work-righteousness.

The figure for envy in Oriental culture is an evil eye. In the sermon on the Mount Jesus observed, "If your eye is evil, your whole body will be dark" (Matthew 6:23). He had in mind the poisonous results of jealousy. The caretaker of the vineyard put his finger right on the central ailment of the firsts who became last when he asked their spokesman, "Is your eye evil because I am generous?"

Among us the figure for envy might be the grasping hand. In Scripture it is the kind of eye that observes the good fortune of someone else and turns sour, not because it wants more for itself but because the other person has so much. Hence Jesus lists an evil eye among the bad crop of thoughts that comes out of the human heart (Mark 7:22).

And so v. 17 begins with _____, meaning "In just this way the last will be first and the first last." Accordingly those who were hired last not only got paid first; they also exhibited the spirit of gladly accepting the generous payment of the householder, thereby indicating the attitude which characterizes those who rank first in God's rule. Those who labored all day were not only paid last but by their grumbling also revealed their envious attitude and so were asked to take what they had earned and to be gone.

The Point of Comparison

Jeremias quotes a passage from IV Ezra 5:42 which suggests that this saying about first and last might mean just equality of pay (J. J. p. 36). There the prophet wonders whether preceding generations will have the advantages of those who live and survive to the end. He is told: "He said to me: I will make my judgment like a round dance; the last therein shall not be behind, nor the first in front." The point of the parable, then, would be equal pay for all in the kingdom. It would teach equality of reward.

There seems to be more to the parable than just the matter of equal payment, a day's wage for everyone. The very instruction to start paying the last first would seem to indicate as much. Therefore, let us look a little more closely at the point of the parable.

The story of the parable comes in two vignettes. The first seven verses describe the householder hiring people at various hours of the day to work in his vineyard. He does so to meet the urgency of the situation. The second scene deals with the payment of the workers in reverse order, the grumbling of those who had worked all day, and the reproach by the caretaker for being envious at the householder's generosity.

Let us remember the context, as Matthew gives it. Simon Peter had asked a question about getting. "What shall we have for having left everything and followed you?" (19:27). By way of response Jesus promised them a share in His own rule and then set forth divine generosity on the principle that anyone who leaves what is dear to him will receive an award many times bigger than the seeming losses incurred. In fact, he will inherit eternal life.

This is not a matter of getting but of being given. Leaving one's father and mother, sisters and brothers, and houses for Jesus' name's sake, is not an act of achievement but of response to the prior offer of God's kingdom. Jesus' disciples were the first in such an arrangement, but Peter's question was the kind that could put him among the last. Matthew 19:30 reminds us that there are many firsts who will be last just for this reason; and many lasts who will be first because the thought of getting something for their achievement does not occur to them. The latter are well aware of the fact that they have no right to be in the vineyard in the first place; they were invited.

Peter's question was born of the desire to compare himself with the young rich rule who turned away sadly from Jesus when he was told he would have to leave all his possessions behind in order to follow Jesus. Against the background of that experience Peter asked a question in order to commend the achievement of the Twelve to Jesus' attention with a view to getting both a compliment and a promise. He was given a

promise but not a compliment; for God's favor is undeserved. That is the meaning of the word "grace."

Thence the parable speaks of a householder going out to hire people to work in his vineyard. None of these workmen had a claim on him. The master did not owe them a job. He put them to work in consequence of a decision he had made. Their only other option was to spend a day in the marketplace doing nothing of value. They got a job and the prospect of a day's wage solely at the initiative of the householder.

The vineyard is a symbol of God's people. "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel," said Isaiah (5:7). To be invited and sent into this vineyard is to be asked to go to work for the Lord according to His arrangements.

At times this also was called the Parable of the Hours. There has been a considerable difference of opinion, however, as to what the various hours mean. Origen interpreted them to indicate various epochs in the history of the world: the Flood, the call of Abraham, the mission of Moses. Jerome and Chrysostom both held that they signify different periods in the life of an individual: birth, youth, old age. Bengel argued that the parable referred to various periods in the ministry of Jesus: the calling of the apostles, the ascension, and Pentecost. (Moslems think of themselves as being eleventh-hour workers.) There is no reason why any of these suggestions should be excluded.

The first scene in the story tells us of a householder - a figure for God - going out to hire people at different hours. More difficult is the second vignette.

If we keep Peter's question in mind and consider it in the light of Jewish teaching on the subject of merit - of getting! - we shall not go far wrong in suggesting that the parable was told to counteract the notion that God rewards men with eternal life according to their performance.

In Jewish teaching, first of all, righteous action is expected of all, and to be righteous means to do Torah (Law). Here is a quotation from the Sayings of the Fathers (a major Jewish work!) (Aboth 2:8): "If you have done much in the Torah, do not claim merit for yourself, because for this purpose you were created."

Secondly, "The reward is in proportion to the toil" (Aboth 5:23). This principle is vividly illustrated by a rabbinic parable given in Jeremias. It goes like this:

Rabbi Bun bar Hijja died early, on the very day his son was born, who later also became a rabbi. The funeral oration was delivered in the form of a parable. The rabbi in charge of the service began by saying that the situation was like that of a king who had hired a great many workers. After two hours the king inspected them and found one that surpassed all others. He took him by the hand and walked up and down with him until evening. In the evening each one received the same amount. Then they murmured and said: "We have worked the whole day, and this man only two hours, yet you have paid him the full day's wages." The king replied: "I have not wronged you. This man has done more in two hours than you have done during the whole day." So likewise, concluded the oration, has Rabbi Bun bar Hijja accomplished more in 28 years than many a grey-haired scholar in a hundred years. (J. J. p. 138)

You can also note Jeremias' summary observation:

In the rabbinical version the labourer who has only worked a short time has done more than all the rest; he is represented as having fully earned his wages, and the purpose of the parable is to extol his excellence. In the parable of Jesus, 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. Thus in this trivial detail lies the difference between two worlds: the world of merit, and the world of grace; the law contrasted with gospel. (J. J. p. 138)

That is well said. To it must be added the point mentioned previously: the workers are sent into the vineyard in the first place solely on the initiative of the householder. He makes their day meaningful. Had it not been for him, the whole day would have been wasted in idling and gossiping.

We are now ready to spell out the point of comparison. It might read as follows:

When God is at work re-establishing His rule over and among men something happens which is similar to a householder engaging workmen for his vineyard at various hours, having paid them all the same wage, regardless of the amount of time put in, and then having to rebuke those who grumble at such generosity because they are envious and so jeopardize their relationship to the whole undertaking.

Having established the tertium comparationis (the point of comparison), we proceed to draw from it what we might call the central truth:

The opportunity of serving God comes to us at His call. It is such an undeserved favor that we have no right to respond to it with envy and grumbling when we note that others are called into this activity and are awarded in exactly the same way even though they may have worked for a period of time less long and under conditions more favorable than our own. Such ingratitude runs the risk of rejection on the Last Day.

We could put this truth another way by saying that God's grace must not be measured by our standards of justice. God's grace, in fact, explodes justice.

Historical-Critical Context and Setting

Please keep in mind that we have been working with the text as it is given in Matthew's gospel. We analyzed it as part of Jesus' reply to His disciples and made use of the total text as a way of determining the meaning of what Jesus said. This, however, does not satisfy the historical critic. He proposes some further considerations, as a look at Jeremias illustrates.

We already noted his observation that the "present Matthaean context is not original" (J. J. p. 36). From there he proceeds to do a study from which issues his conclusion that the "original historical setting" (J. J. p. 38) was a moment in Jesus' ministry when He was faced with the need to vindicate the "good news" against those who were criticizing Him for associating with all sorts and conditions of men. The primitive church then related the parable to the disciples of Jesus and "thus diverted its use," as Jeremias puts it, "to the instruction of the Christian community" (J. J. p. 38). What took place is described as an example of the way "the tradition underwent an alteration or restriction of the audience" (J. J. p. 38).

Now, how does Jeremias arrive at these conclusions? His first step consists in noting the context of the parable as found in Mark, where it is said to assert that "in the age to come all earthly gradations of rank will be reversed" (J. J. p. 35). Matthew, he goes on to say, changed the emphasis by his use of this parable, letting it represent the reversal of rank to take place on judgment day. That is to say, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard introduces an eschatological note which could not have come from Jesus but came from the primitive church which found the delay of the parousia (the second coming) and the coming of a new age as troublesome.

It becomes evident that Jeremias works with an assumption that is very prevalent among practitioners of the historical critical method, namely that Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, expected an age to come but as an historical development growing out of His own ministry and without history first coming to an end by something known as the Last Day. The reason for this point of view is not difficult to comprehend. Judgment Day is not the kind of item that merits much consideration when you are making an analysis on the basis of scientific historical criteria; for these have to do with principles of validation that grow out of a cause-and-effect sequence. The Last Day does not fit into that category of things.

Judgment Day will, in fact, be an act of divine intervention and not the end result of an historical process. Jesus, it is claimed, did not know this. While He may have anticipated the advent of the kingdom of God in His lifetime as the birth of something radically new in terms of structure and culture, He was badly mistaken, said Albert Schweitzer toward the beginning of this century.³ With all His splendid ethics, as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus perished as everyone else does. His dreams of a better day came to an end with His violent death.

At this point a major doctrine is at issue. The exegete who uses the method of historical criticism and wants to achieve what it sets out to do must discard the Biblical teaching on the communication of attributes between the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. For the very thought of an historical human being having the kind of Messianic consciousness Jesus exhibited can not find any room in truth as drawn from cause-and-effect validation.

Whatever there is of eschatology in the New Testament is a product of the church's thought, it is said. The problem of the delayed parousia haunted its members. They resorted to apocalyptic language to articulate their faith that the Son of Man would come again as God's vicegerent and establish His kingdom. Jesus

³Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus (New York: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 358, 359.

Himself was not aware of the fact that He was that Son of Man. Hence the notion of a Last Day with its reversal of rank does not go back to Jesus Himself; it is part of the evangelist's interpretation of the parable as applied to members of the church at his time.

There can be little doubt that the parable as we now have it has as one of its crucial features the stress on paying the last workmen first in order to test the spirit of those who were invited first and worked all day. That item, of course, is somewhat difficult to fit into the assertion that Jesus told the parable to vindicate the "good news." Hence Jeremias plays down this ingredient. In fact, he tries to get rid of it, as we have already indicated, by arguing that the phrase "beginning with the last" (v. 8) may mean just "including" or "not omitting." It "was not originally concerned mainly with the order of payment", and it did not convey the lesson "about the reversal of rank at the end since all receive the same wage" (J. J. p. 36). As Jeremias points out, it is generally believed that this parable "is intended to teach the equality of reward in the kingdom of God," (J. J. p. 36). Jeremias, however, does not accept this view; he believes that the action of the overseer in paying the last the same wage as the first was intended to startle the audience into gasping at the thought of "so much money for the last." (J. J. p. 36)

"Forget the Saying!"

In that case the statement of v. 16: "And so the last will be first and the first last" does not fit. It must be got rid of. Jeremias does so by declaring it to have been an independent logion (a saying), totally unconnected with the original context as given in Mark 10:31. It was added either by the tradition or by Matthew as a generalizing conclusion, "but does not really tally with its meaning" (J. J. p. 37). He, by the way, is not alone in this. In a very recent paperback A. M. Hunter says, "To interpret the story rightly, forget the saying, 'So the last shall be first and the first last.'"⁴

Why, then, did Jesus tell the parable? The answer is to shock his opponents by the story of a householder who out of pity for the poverty of these lasts allows them to be paid a full day's wage. In that case the parable depicts "the action of a large-hearted man who is compassionate and full of sympathy for the poor" (J. J. p. 37). The stress of the story, therefore, is on the words of the overseer in v. 15: "I am so generous." That is how God deals with men. He is merciful. Even to publicans and sinners He grants a place in His kingdom.

Let me now try to indicate in a summary fashion what has been accomplished. Jeremias has eliminated from this parable the possibility of Jesus having made any reference to the Last Day. The action of paying the last first has been leveled off to signify equal payment for all. That half of the saying on first-last and last-first which deals with the former has been excised by dismissing the sentence as a floating logion mistakenly attached to the parable somewhere in the process of transmission. The grumblers in the parable are like the Pharisees who murmur because Jesus accepts sinners and publicans as full participants in the kingdom of God.

This is all Jesus wanted to say. The rest is interpretation of the church and of Matthew. They re-oriented the original parable of Jesus by having it told to disciples and by attaching to it the saying about the last becoming first and the first last (v. 16). We have here an example of the way "the principle of transformation" worked itself out in the process of transmission (J. J. p. 38).

Understanding and Meaning

Let me stop here for a moment to note a significant hermeneutical consideration. In the so-called "new hermeneutic" the meaning of a pericope is derived from an understanding of it; and understanding is described as entering fully into the process of transmission. That is to say, unless the reader knows how such a principle as the one of transformation was at work in the tradition, he will not understand the meaning of this parable -- regardless of what the words say.

This point cannot be stressed too strongly; for it amounts to a repudiation of two basic hermeneutical principles: 1) that a text has only one meaning; and 2) that this meaning is derived from what the words say. There are so many subjective possibilities in any discussion of the methodology of transmission that no two people need ever agree because there is no consensus on all the details involved in the

⁴A. M. Hunter, The Parables Then and Now (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 71.

way a given parable got from the point at which Jesus related it to the moment when Matthew wrote it. Hence, as someone has observed, interest in the methodology of transmission has displaced appreciation of the doctrine of inspiration.

Jeremias' chief aim is the twofold one of suggesting not only what Jesus originally said but also what His words meant in their original setting and then to show how His statements were given a new direction in the process of transmission, in the present instance primarily by Matthew himself. We now move beyond Jeremias as we consider another aspect of the historical critical method.

If it is possible to get back to what Jesus really said, that alone is authoritative. Matthew's use of a parable of Jesus is part of the embellishment and may be stripped away. Once having got down to the parable as Jesus told it we, like Matthew, have the right to do a new interpretation, according to our understanding of it, for we stand in the same process of transmission as did Matthew. We belong to the same inspired community.

If, then, I agree with those theologians who believe that the phrase "kingdom of God" is an expression for restructuring the social order, I can properly apply this parable of Jesus to the economic sphere. As William Barclay points out, "some scholars have seen in this parable two great truths": 1) every man has a right to a day's work; and 2) every one has a right to a living wage."⁵

Once the evangelist's use of the parable is ignored it can be used as a story to give expression to the kind of gentle humanism adopted by Barclay himself when he remarks, "But the real lesson of this parable is that it is the spirit in which work is done which makes all the difference."⁶ But it can also be referred to as relevant to the problem of the poor in order to justify support for guerilla units in South America, Angola, or South Africa as a way of showing that the poor have an equal right and status in God's kingdom. In this way, a parable of Jesus can be fit into the Marxist view of reality by virtue of the fact that it has been applied to the issue of economic maldistribution. Jesus, then, can be turned into a social revolutionary, especially when the parable is undergirded by the story of the cleansing of the temple! That is justification enough for agitating to have churches and church agencies withdraw their funds from banks that do business with the government of South Africa!

It is quite legitimate to reach such conclusions provided you accept the assumptions of historical criticism. There is no room, as you can tell, here for anything that might remotely relate to the doctrine of inspiration, unless, of course, you mean the "inspired community" of today.

Inspiration

In this situation it is imperative for us to consider one more crucial element in what must be done if a Biblical text is to accomplish what it was designed to offer at the time of its being written down. There are two passages in the Gospel according to St. John to which I want to call your attention. They are John 14:26 and 16:13.

John 14:26 says, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." And John 16:13 reads: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."

It is clear from John 17:20 that we are to understand the words of Jesus given in chapters 13 through 16 as addressed to the apostles. Their words have a one-time function in God's work, namely to be the means by which men are to be brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Here is what the passage says: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word. . . ."

To this apostolic group Jesus gave the specific promise that the Holy Spirit would "bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." Jesus added, "He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak. . . ." We can tell from the four Gospel accounts which we have in what way the Holy Spirit brought the words of Jesus to the remembrance of those who were His followers. He did so with all the variety inherent in the teaching of One who came and spoke with authority; for His remembered words were put to living use in the life of that community which we know as the early church.

It is evident that the disciples were not reminded of the words of Jesus in the wooden way that the sayings of the rabbis were transmitted. The pedestrian and pedantic way of that process becomes clear from the

⁵William Barclay, And Jesus Said (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 164.

⁶Ibid., p. 166.

following example given in the Mishnah:

R. Joshua said: I have received as a tradition from Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai, who heard from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, as a Halakah given to Moses from Sinai, that Elijah will not come to declare unclean or clean, to remove afar or to bring nigh, but to remove afar those [families] that were brought nigh by violence and to bring nigh those [families] that were removed afar by violence.

The very difference between this colorless catena (chain) and the life-giving power of Jesus' words is exactly that of the contrast we might expect between the words of a great teacher in Judaism and the logia of the Lord of the Church, working through His Spirit. To Nicodemus, the Master in Israel, Jesus had to say, "Verily, verily, I say to you, unless a man is born of water and of spirit, he can not enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Word of Apostle and Evangelist

All this brings us to another major presupposition of the historical-critical method, namely that the words of Christ as the exalted Lord are outside the ken of the interpreter, since the latter works chiefly as an historian. Accordingly, the exegete may be able to determine what it was the primitive church believed and taught after Easter or Pentecost; but ascribing such faith and its articulation to the ascended Lord and the gift of His Spirit is a matter that lies outside the province of historical research. Its interest lies in trying to determine just what it was that Jesus said as the prophet from Nazareth during his lifetime.

In such a context as this it is impossible not to refer for a moment to a very famous book by Martin Kaehler with the title Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche, biblische Christus (the so-called historical Jesus and the historic, biblical Christ). This was the work which for the first time and at great length discussed the question of the continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the Church. Kaehler himself came to some rather conservative conclusions; but that was in 1892. The issue has moved far beyond that. In fact, the problem itself is thought to be irrelevant in the case of those who use the historical critical method except in the sense that it is possible to show what the primitive Christian community believed about Christ. But such faith must be distinguished from what Jesus Himself believed and taught. Only what is historical in the primary setting can be solidly true; the rest is interpretation.

Here let me quote from one of the best essays on the subject of the relationship between history and truth. The sentence is taken from Ferdinand Hahn's "The Quest of the Historical Jesus and the Special Character of the Sources Available to Us" and reads:

In this case, to work in a historical-critical fashion means to distinguish everything within the unified, complete vision of the Gospels, which only gradually became clear to the church in its understanding of faith after Easter, from the things which we can still determine about the concrete history of Jesus, the way his ministry originally appeared, and the parts of his proclamation which are undoubtedly genuine.

This genuine center must be stripped of the significance put upon it by apostle and evangelist. It is at this point that the Christian exegete calls out, "Halt!" He does so believing that the meaning offered by the canonical documents is authoritative and decisive for every age of the Church. The word of prophet, apostle and evangelist is true, because each one of them spoke and wrote by that special guidance of the Holy Spirit which we call inspiration.

In the present instance, Matthew's text gives us the apostolic interpretation of what Jesus said, and what His words were intended to suggest for all ages to come. To dismantle this meaning as being no more than a part of the structure involves discarding or even rejecting the truth that came by way of the Holy Spirit "recalling" for the apostles what it was that Jesus had said and was still saying as Lord of the Church, guiding it into all truth. Those who heard Jesus in person had the task of confirming it; and rejecting it merits a retribution greater than that inflicted on persons who failed to heed the word of angels (Heb. 2:1-3).

⁷ Herbert Danby, The Mishnah (Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 436 (Eduyoth 8.7).

⁸ Essays by Ferdinand Hahn, Wenzel Lohff, Günther Bornkamm, What Can We Know About Jesus? (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 18 (Translated by Grover Foley).

With this whole dimension of the Biblical revelation the practitioner of the historical critical method is incapable of dealing; for he has defined it out of the circle of his concern. By his own claims he is not a theologian but an historian. The response of a true exegete to all this can only be the sorrowful sentiment of Mary Magdalene speaking to the person she thought was the gardener, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him" (John 20:13). That this is, indeed, the result may be seen from one of the most eloquent but saddening paragraphs ever written. It is to be found at the very end of Schweitzer's Quest and reads like this:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.

Summary

By way of summary, then, it may be said that the consistent application of the presuppositions of historical criticism eliminates from Matthew's account of the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (20:1-16) the meaning given in and by the words of the evangelist's text. It detaches from the gospel account that decisive and authoritative interpretation of a word from Jesus which was given under inspiration and made binding on the church of all times and all places. Detached from the meaning offered by Matthew, it becomes legitimate to re-interpret what is presumed to have been the content and purpose of the parable as spoken by Jesus Himself and in this way apply it to such fields as economic theory and the psychology of laboring men. In this way the consistent use of the historical critical method rejects the doctrine of the communication of attributes, denigrates the Biblical teaching on inspiration, and erodes the authority of the canonical text.