

The Parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matthew 20:1-16)

A. B. Caneday

PRECAUTIONS CONCERNING PARABLES

INTERPRETING JESUS' PARABLES is fraught with dangers as witnessed throughout the history of interpretation.¹ In a sense, explaining a

parable is like explaining a riddle or perhaps a joke. As explanation "spoils" a riddle for the quick-witted and indulges the dull, so explanation tends to diminish the genius of Jesus' parables and shortcuts delight for those who hear with understanding. Nevertheless, occasionally Jesus concedes to his torpid Twelve and provides for them his own explanation of his parables (e.g., see Mark 4:13-20; 7:17-23), setting an example for Christian teachers and ministers to follow.

As with several of the accepted titles for Jesus' parables "The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard" seems mis-

directed, for the parable's evident focal point of similarity between the "kingdom of heaven" and the earthly analog is not the human workers but the human owner (*anthrōpō oikodespotē*) of the vineyard who stands in contrast to them—thus the title, "The Parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner."² This modified title features a catchword that evidently links the parable's "good" vineyard owner (Matt 20:15) to the earlier narrative concerning Jesus' exchange with the Rich Young Man who inquired, "Teacher, what *good* thing must I do in order that I might have eternal life?" Jesus responded, "Why do you inquire concerning the *good* thing? Only one is the *Good One*" (19:16, 17).

As accepted titles tend to mislead understanding, so do other common popular assumptions and uses of the parables. Contrary to popular notion, Jesus does not teach the crowds with parables to reveal his message so that even the most spiritually dull hearers will understand. Nor does he design his parables as clever illustrations to alleviate misunderstanding of his identity.³

A. B. CANEDAY is Professor of New Testament Studies & Biblical Theology at Northwestern College in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

He has written many scholarly articles, including contributions to two recent edited volumes: *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Exegetical, Biblical, and Theological Studies* (Paternoster, 2009) and *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in its Ancient Context* (T. & T. Clark, 2008). Dr. Caneday is co-author (with Thomas R. Schreiner) of *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (InterVarsity, 2001).

The purpose of Jesus' parabolic teaching has a frame of reference, namely, the Old Testament. Behind the Greek *parabolē* stands the Hebrew *māšāl*, which the LXX translates as *parabolē* in all but five of its thirty-three instances occurrences. As such, *parabolē* is elastic, referring to proverbs, maxims, similes, allegories, fables, analogies, riddles, taunts, wisdom oracles, and dark enigmatic sayings. Jesus' parables fall along this spectrum. Best known are his story parables narrated by each evangelist in the parable discourse (Matt 13:1-53; Mark 4:1-34; Luke 4:4-30). Jesus also utters pithy parabolic maxims (Matt 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39), parabolic riddles (Matt 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 41-44), and parables designed to be understood by his enemies to provoke them to carry out their murderous conspiracy against him (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19).⁴

Enigmatic as his parables are, so is the purpose of Jesus' parables, prompting misunderstanding, even avoidance of the Gospel writers' plainly stated explanations of why Jesus teaches in parables. They have a double force, for they simultaneously reveal and conceal things concerning the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus' disciples ask, "Why do you speak in parables to the crowds?" (Matt 13:10; Mark 4:10; Luke 8:9). Jesus plainly tells his disciples,

To know the mysteries of heaven's reign has been given to you, but not to those. For whoever has, to that one will be given even more. And whoever does not have, even what that one has will be taken away. Because of this I speak to them in parables, that seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, with them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled (Matt 13:11-14).⁵

Again, in the midst of narrating the parable discourse, Matthew uniquely explains,

Jesus spoke all these things in parables to the

crowds and without a parable he said nothing to them so as to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet saying, "I will open my mouth in parables; I will pour forth what has been hidden from the foundation of the world" (Matt 13:34, 35; citation of Psalm 78:2).⁶

As with parables in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, Jesus' parables—by bearing the double force of revealing and concealing—convey an indicting and judging aspect. In addition to ways that Jesus' parabolic teaching fulfills Asaph's saying of Psalm 78 as outlined by D. A. Carson, it seems Jesus' teaching in parables entails judgment as does Asaph's psalm.⁷ The psalm's extended recitation of the Lord's covenant faithfulness and repeated refrain of Israel's persistent unfaithfulness is parabolic. Thus, to recite the psalm is to recite a parable, and recitation calls for hearing. Rehearsal requires understanding. Retelling this psalm demands wisdom to discern its parables that warn of Israel's judgment, that is, defiant, rebellious, and covenant breaking Israel. Whoever hears or sings Asaph's psalm without discerning its parables incriminates oneself with the judgments orally rehearsed.

Likewise, Jesus' parables call for hearing with discernment which is the featured significance of the parable of the Sower narrated by each Synoptic Gospel.⁸ The parable is a veiled presentation about hearing the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 13:1-9; Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8), followed, first, by Jesus' stated purpose for teaching in parables and, second, by his explanation of the Sower (Matt 13:10-23; Mark 4:10-20; Luke 8:9-15). Mark cogently records, "You do not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?" (4:13), disclosing the preternatural genius of Jesus' parables: every time someone retells his parables, revealing and concealing invariably take place. Either one listens with discernment or one hears with gradations of impairment, even hearing sounds without registering.

Jesus' parables conceal the truths of the king-

dom of heaven within plainly spoken earthly analogies for all to hear. “Whoever lacks discernment, even what one does have will be removed, but whoever has discernment receives even greater” (Matt 13:12).⁹ Consequently, one does not haphazardly engage deciphering Jesus’ parables except to one’s own peril, even whether writing or reading an essay in a theological journal that concerns Jesus’ parables.

Hearing without understanding manifests itself in varying degrees and ways. For example, failing to discern that Jesus’ parables teach heavenly realities by way of earthly analogies, many suppose that Jesus’ concerns are this-world-focused, even socio-political. Thus, some impose upon Jesus’ parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner a foreign ideology such as Marxism as though Jesus were rebuking economic practices of his day as he “foresaw a society of simple communism, ruled by God” in concert with much that Karl Marx taught.¹⁰ So, one contends, “In his parable of the vineyard laborers, the point is that workers receive not according to their work but according to their need.”¹¹ Others, evidently afraid to offend Jewish sensibilities and to be accused of being anti-Semitic, recast Jesus as “a teacher connected with the Pharisaic tradition” and reject the traditional understanding of Matt 20:1-16 addressing Pharisees.¹² Culbertson reacts against interpreters who believe that Jesus tells the parable against the Pharisees, for it is unthinkable that Jesus tells a parable that entails a vineyard that does not represent Israel. So, he insists that the Jesus of “Pharisaic identity” offers the parable “as a message of comfort to the Jewish people in a time of crisis and upheaval.”¹³ To do this Culbertson rejects the connection between the parable (20:1-15) and the saying, “Thus, the last will be first, and the first last.”¹⁴

Still others become so entangled in discussing details concerned with day-laborers in first-century Israel that they get lost in the accretions of their own historical reconstructions including literary parallelisms found in rabbinic writings.¹⁵

Thus, they refocus the meaning of the parable in line with their modern sensibilities, prejudices, and historical-critical reconstructions.

Use of parables isolated from their literary contexts also leads to incorrect interpretations and wrongful conclusions concerning individual parables. Isolation treats parables as individual units that become illustrations of timeless spiritual and eternal truths. Not all isolation of parables from their contexts occurs at the hands of novices who tend to read the Bible devotionally in solitary bits and pieces. In quest of the authentic sayings of the historical Jesus, scholars often resort to isolation in their attempt to identify the original meaning and context of parables. The parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner suffers such abuse.¹⁶

Unlike Luke’s account, Matthew and Mark follow the narrative concerning Jesus’ encounter with the Rich Young Ruler and Peter’s assertion, “Look, we have left everything and followed you” (Matt 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-28) with Jesus’ aphorism, “But many who are first will be last, and last ones first” (Matt 19:30; Mark 10:31). Unique to Matthew’s Gospel, following Jesus’ aphorism is the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matt 20:1-16). Placement of this parable and the fact that the aphorism follows the parable as a punctuating *inclusio* (20:16)¹⁷ suggests on the surface that the parable explains the chiasmic and aphoristic *inclusio* but now inverted, “In this manner, the last shall be first and the first last.”¹⁸

THE PARABLE OF THE GENEROUS VINEYARD OWNER

HUMAN STORY; HEAVENLY MEANING

Jesus announces that heaven’s reign (*hē basileia tōn ouranōn*), that is, God’s redeeming dominion, is analogous to a human master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.¹⁹ So begins a parable that has proved difficult to understand given its wide and diverse explanations, uses, and abuses. Verse 1 provides smooth transition from the question about reward and the epigrammatic saying about the first and

the last (19:27-30) with the explanatory “for” (*gar*), confirming that Jesus’ parable of the Generous Vineyard Owner develops progression in his response to Peter’s query (19:27).

Also worthy of brief notice is the adjectival use of *anthrōpos*, a human master of the house. Here, as in many places throughout the New Testament, translators regularly fail to account for *anthrōpos* as an adjective in Jesus’ parables when he sketches heaven’s reign with analogies to things human as in *human sower* (13:24), *human enemy* (13:28), *human merchant* (13:44), *human master of a house* (13:52; 20:1), and *human king* (18:23; 22:2).²⁰ Inexplicably, even the TNIV disappoints, not accounting for *anthrōpos* at all.²¹ Likewise, when exegetes overlook Matthew’s adjectival use of *anthrōpos* they more easily drift to misconstrue the parable as commenting upon earthly socio-political matters rather than portraying heavenly things.²² For example, Pablo Jiménez reifies the protracted imagery by claiming, “The main topic of the parable of the laborers of the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) is God’s attitude toward the poor. The divine attitude would be depicted by the landowner’s merciful treatment of the laborers (v. 10).”²³

By telling the vineyard parable Jesus offers no commentary upon human contractual work relationships of his day, whether they are just or unjust.²⁴ Rather, Jesus draws a point of vertical analogy from what is human to teach what is divine by formulating an image of an earthly employment situation to teach how God, in his redeeming dominion, distributes his kingdom’s reward (*misthos*, 20:8).²⁵ Locate and understand the human-divine analogy that Jesus draws and one discerns the meaning of the parable. Keep in mind, however, that Jesus’ analogical stories (parables) entail both similarity and dissimilarity between things human or earthly and things divine. Atypical or unexpected features may accent dissimilarity.

UNEXPECTED FEATURES IN THE EARTHLY STORY

Jesus’ human story entails an owner of a house who is faced with the need of day laborers to tend his vineyard, presumably to harvest grapes. Early in the morning, at dawn, he goes to the marketplace in the village to hire workers. He and the laborers agree upon a denarius for the day’s wage.²⁶ Without any stated reason other than to hire more laborers, at three-hour intervals throughout the day he returns to the marketplace where he finds others standing idle whom he hires at the third, the sixth, and the ninth hours. Finally, he returns at the eleventh hour to find still others who are inactive for the whole day. He hires them and sends them to work in his vineyard.

Thus far, Jesus purposefully and deftly tells a credible story with only semi-inconspicuous atypical elements in the parable, such as the lateness of hiring some of the laborers, perhaps those hired at the ninth hour but especially those hired an hour before sunset, and the willingness of laborers hired from the third through the ninth hours to trust the owner to give them “whatever is right” without agreeing upon a set wage and no mention of any wage for those hired last.²⁷

The greatest unexpected feature of the parable correlates with the epigrammatic and chiasmic inclusio that envelops the parable, and Matthew actually inverts the aphorism itself to accentuate the featured element of surprise within the parable—“Thus, the last shall be first and the first last” (20:16; cf. 19:30). This atypical element of the parable comes at the end of the day when the laborers are to be paid. Instead of paying the workers in the order of their being beckoned from the marketplace and sent to the vineyard, the owner instructs his foreman to give the workers the wage in inverse order, giving one denarius to each worker, beginning with the last and progressing to the first hired. Once those who began work at dawn see that the workers hired an hour before sunset receive a denarius, they expect more but receive the same, the amount agreed upon at the

beginning of the day.

Interpreting the parable as having a single point, featuring God's graciousness, as the parable is regularly interpreted, encounters difficulty when considering the inverse order of pay that figures prominently in the parable. Thus, some exegetes dispute that the parable's inverse order of pay features God's generosity or his equity. Lebacqz would rewrite the parable: "If the parable were meant to focus on the generosity of the landowner, it would be told in a different order: those who were hired first would be paid first. Seeing them receive a denarius, those hired last would expect to receive about a tenth of a denarius."²⁸ From a different angle, challenging the claim that the parable teaches both God's justice and generosity, Derrett contends, "It is usually thought that this parable teaches God's 'behaviour' by a picture utterly unlike human behavior: if this were true it would run contrary to almost every other parable.... On the contrary the story is as as [sic] lifelike as it is amusing."²⁹

Even though Lebacqz and Derrett appeal to valid reasons for not accepting at face value the traditional single-point understanding of the parable, both engage in exercises in missing the fuller point of the parable. Both inadequately take note of the divergent or unexpected features of the parable. Thus, both domesticate the parable. For example, Derrett tames the unexpected features of the parable in his effort to make it lifelike by relying upon the Talmud for minimum wage regulations and by assuming conditions that the parable neither states nor implies.³⁰

Efforts to domesticate these unexpected features derive from hearing without adequate discernment. Jesus' purpose is not socio-political. He is not overturning human employment practices by imposing a new ethic to govern hiring contracts so that all workers should receive the same pay for unequal duration of labor. Jesus' parable is an earthly story that figuratively portrays things heavenly, not earthly.

Criticisms of the parable's design misses the

fact that Jesus purposefully stretches human imagination as Huffman rightly observes, "Jesus deliberately and cleverly led the listeners along by degrees until they understood that if God's generosity was to be represented by a man, such a man would be different from any man ever encountered."³¹ Yet, even Huffman's observation does not sufficiently account for the fullness of the atypical features of the parable. It seems that the point of Jesus' parable is not adequately encompassed by exegetes who identify a singular point from this multiple point parable. Yes, the parable teaches that God's giving of the kingdom of heaven does not take into account any human merit for the whole dispensing is of his grace that is free from external constraints.³² Yet, the staging of the parable yields meaning that is more complex than this.

Here is the genius of Jesus' parable. He devises a story that intentionally stretches credibility by depicting a "generous" man who hires day laborers whose plan unfolds and becomes evident only after one has heard the whole parable.³³ Consider the exquisite progression of the parable. The generous man's plan entails (1) not only repeated appearances but even an unexpected and very late appearance at the marketplace to contract workers to work for an hour, (2) specifying agreed upon payment only for the first laborers contracted but keeping open payment schedules for laborers later employed, (3) transgressing ordinary human affairs by inverting the order of distributing the wage from last to first hired while the first hired watch and wait expectantly, (4) distributing the same wage to everyone equally without distinction, (5) purposefully devising a plan to provoke to jealousy the expectant first hired workers, in order that (6) he could feature both his equity and generosity by (7) giving the identical reward to all indivisibly thus banishing jealousy.

The generous vineyard owner's atypical order of pay, bringing the last hired to the front of the line and sending the first to the back of the line to watch with expectancy until they would receive their wage, and atypical generosity in dispens-

ing the same wage of a denarius to all the later hired workers incites the first employed workers to grumble, 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 owner’s reply underscores (1) the justice of his action, (2) the fact that he kept the contract he had made at the beginning of the day, (3) that he does not banish the first hired workers and turn them away empty-handed, (4) his generosity to give to those last hired even as to those first hired, (5) his rightful authority to do with his possessions as he desires, and (6) the jealousy of the first laborers to guard their perceived advantage or superiority over the other workers juxtaposed with his own generosity.³⁴

The stress of the parable’s end falls upon this interaction between the vineyard owner and the workers first contracted.³⁵ From this interaction it seems evident that distribution of the equal reward reveals both the owner’s equity with generosity and the first laborers’ jealousy to safeguard recognition of longevity of service over brevity in the vineyard. This complicates discernment of the parable’s meaning.

THE MEANING OF THE EARTHLY STORY

Contrary to efforts to uncover the original context where Jesus first spoke this vineyard parable, as though that were possible given that Matthew’s Gospel alone narrates the parable, it is incumbent upon exegetes to acknowledge that placement of the parable obligates one to understand the parable within the narrative of the First Gospel not within an unknown context. Unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew includes the parable. The exegete’s task, then, is to determine its significance and meaning within the flow of the narrative.

First, determining what Matthew most likely wrote is reasonable and necessary, given the divergent testimony of Greek manuscripts concerning 20:16. Modern translations reflect the assessment of scholars that the second proverbial expression as read in the KJV and ASV—“for many be

called but few are chosen”—is likely not original but an interpolation by assimilation to Matt 22:14.³⁶ Like Mark, Matthew’s account concerning Jesus’ encounter with the Rich Young Ruler followed by Peter’s inquisitive reminder—“Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will there be for us?” (Matt 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-28)—includes Jesus’ proverb, “But many who are first will be last, and last ones first” (Matt 19:30; Mark 10:31).³⁷ Following these words, Matthew’s Gospel alone includes the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matt 20:1-16) standing between Jesus’ two proverbial statements, the second presented as the inverse of the former. It is worth noting that the epigrammatic saying of 19:30 which is chiasmic—“Many first ones will be last, and last ones first”—becomes an inverted chiasm in 20:16—“In this manner, the last shall be first and the first last” (20:16).

As stated earlier, this placement of the parable, enveloped within these two statements of the same chiasmic epigram presented in an inverted chiasmic arrangement, accentuates the primary unexpected or atypical feature of the parable, namely, the inverted distribution of equal reward, beginning with the last hired and moving to the first employed. Add to this the fact that the adverb (*houtōs*), “in this manner,” introduces the inverted bracketing epigram, it is difficult to avoid the obvious, that the enclosing proverb, particularly with its inversion in 20:16, enforces the point of the parable and that the parable explains, develops, and prepares for the inverted specific proverbial inclusio, “In this manner, the last shall be first and the first last.”

Against this, despite observing the relationship between the inclusio and the proverb, C. L. Mitton strangely concludes, “This, however, cannot have been the original meaning of the parable, since in the parable itself there is no reversal of rank or privilege. First and last receive the same payment. The whole point lies in the equality of the reward, not its reversal.”³⁸ Mitton assumes that the bracketing proverb—“The last shall be first and the

first last” (Matt 19:30; 20:16)—requires reversal of rank or privilege, that rich and poor, powerful and weak, prominent and obscure, or great and insignificant will have their ranks reversed, presumably calling for distribution of unequal rewards, the rich will become poor while the poor become rich, etc. Yet, as Mitton acknowledges, “there is in fact no note of rejection ... all, even the grumblers, receive the same reward.”³⁹ What if, however, the proverb requires only the kind of inversion that Jesus depicts in the Generous Vineyard Owner, a leveling that dispenses with proportional ranking, and not a reversal that either expels the dawn-hired-laborers empty-handed or that allocates differing or varying rewards to the workers?⁴⁰ What if the bracketing aphorisms—“The first shall be last and the last first” and the chiastic inverse “The last shall be first and the first last”—are generalized proverbs that bear slightly different meanings depending upon the referents within their given contextual uses? What if the Generous Vineyard Owner adds a perspective that alters the referent for the epigram in 19:30 to a different referent for the epigram in 20:16?

After all, two of the four uses of the proverb and the *only uses* in Matthew’s Gospel envelop the Generous Vineyard Owner (Matt 19:30; 20:16). The other two uses occur in Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30 with a similar expression in Mark 9:35.⁴¹ Given that Mark 10:31 is parallel to Matt 19:30, it seems reasonable to suppose that the proverb’s meaning bears the same sense in both passages.⁴² In Luke 13:30 it seems evident that the proverb’s referent punctuates the “eschatological reversal” that entails banishment from and admittance to the kingdom.⁴³ Many of the religious elite who seem to be in the kingdom will at last be excluded, while others, particularly Israel’s outcasts including Gentiles who seem excluded, will be admitted.⁴⁴

Matthew places the proverb at the end of Jesus’ dialog with the disciples (19:23-29) which comes upon the heels of his exchange with the Rich Young Man concerning inheriting eternal life (19:16-22) and directly before and then imme-

diately following the Generous Vineyard Owner (19:30; 20:16) as an inverted chiastic bracket. Placement of the epigram in 19:30 follows Jesus’ responses first to the disciples’ question—“Who then is able to be saved?” (19:25)—and then to Peter’s inquisitive reminder—“Look, we have left everything and followed you” (19:27). Keeping in mind that the concern is salvation, inheriting eternal life, Jesus says,

Truly, I tell you that in the regeneration when the Son of Man is seated upon the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit upon twelve thrones and will judge the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mothers or children or fields on account of my name, will receive back a hundred times and will inherit eternal life. But many first ones will be last, and last ones first (Matt 19:28-30).

Thus, it seems evident that the epigram of 19:30 entails warning and consolation. Jesus offers consolation to Peter and to all who like him have become poor in this world’s goods to follow Messiah. Jesus delivers warning also to those who like the Rich Young Ruler are rich in this world’s goods. Many who have all will be last; those who have left all will be first.⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the saying in 19:30 is generalized: “*many first ones ...*” (*polloi esontai prōtoi eschatōi kai eschatōi prōtoi*). This is in keeping with Jesus’ parable concerning the camel passing through the eye of a needle. Not all the rich are excluded from the kingdom of heaven. Some rich ones will be saved because salvation, inheritance of eternal life, is not impossible for the wealthy, for “with God all things are possible” (19:26).

Placement of the proverbial saying in Matt 20:16, however, suggests that a different referent may be in view than that in 19:30 (cf. Mark 10:31) and in Luke 13:30 where *some first ones* are banished from the kingdom (“Depart from me all you doers of unrighteousness” [Luke 13:27]).⁴⁶ This is

so for two reasons.

First, the parable itself in Matt 20:8 seems to provide the explicit referent by stating, “Call the workers and give to them the wage, beginning from the last until the first” (20:8). The parable calls for inversion of and specificity of the referent in the proverb. The parable, as will be shown more clearly later, does not depict *banishment of individuals* from the kingdom but rather *banishment of rank and status* from the kingdom by the equal gracious reward given to all alike regardless how much one abandons in devotion to the kingdom depicted by varied starting times of activity in the vineyard.

Second, use of the proverbial saying in 20:16 bears two indicators that specify its referent to be different from the referent that the saying bears in 19:30. The adverb “thus” or “in this manner” (*houōs*) draws the linkage between the parable and the proverbial saying in 20:16. The epigram expresses a fitting conclusion to the parable. Additionally, unlike in 19:30, the saying in 20:16 does not generalize but specifically identifies “the last ones” and “the first ones” with substantive adjectives including articles (*hoi eschatoi; hoi prōtoi*). The epigrammatic saying altered from 19:30 signals its different application. In 20:16, then, “the first ones” (*hoi prōtoi*) does not seem to bear the same referent as “many first ones” (*polloi prōtoi*) bears in 19:30, referring to “many rich.” In 20:16 the referent is to those individuals who are figuratively represented by the first workers hired by the generous vineyard owner. Whom do they represent, (1) Jews, (2) Scribes and Pharisees, as traditionally understood, or (3) the Twelve?

THE MESSAGE OF THE EARTHLY STORY

Identifying the persons figuratively portrayed as hired at different intervals in Jesus’ parable, but especially the first and the last workers, has proved to be no small task. Irenaeus took the good owner’s frequenting the marketplace to hire workers at five intervals as representing five distinguishable periods of redemptive history begin-

ning with Adam and climaxing in Christ. Origen regarded the five intervals as various stages of life when individuals may come to faith in Christ. Still others have identified the first workers with the Jews and the last with Gentile believers.⁴⁷

Modern scholars reject these proposals as allegorization. Though Irenaeus’s approach exceeds the parable’s intent, Origen’s instincts seem close to the mark. The varied work start times may partially signify that Christ’s disciples come to repentance at different times in their lives. Given the flow of the narrative (Matt 19:16-20:16), the different hiring times seem likely to signify the varied calling of Christ’s disciples which includes variations concerning how much they are called to forsake in order to follow him faithfully.⁴⁸ Even though the hiring of laborers at the third, sixth, and ninth hours is hardly the key to interpreting the parable, surely their mention is more than mere drapery to the story. Their inclusion is crucial to provide credibility concerning both the reasonable heightened expectation on the part of the earliest employed laborers as they wait for their pay and the understandable though inexcusable complaint of unfairness they exhibit upon receipt of the identical pay as all the other workers receive who sustain fewer hours of intensive labor.

Exegetes are right to make the case that the parable teaches God’s generosity and mercy.⁴⁹ Yet, criticisms of this traditional interpretation that the parable’s main point is to banish every imagination of meriting entrance into the kingdom of heaven raise valid observations.⁵⁰ If God’s graciousness were the *whole point* of the parable, the conclusion would seem not only extraneous but also distracting if not confusing. If God’s graciousness were the sole point, would not payment of the laborers in the order of their being hired while requiring them to remain until all are paid put greater stress upon the disproportionate and generous reward given to those last hired? If Jesus designs the parable *simply* to overthrow all notions that the reward of eternal life is received by merit, why does he present a parable in which

humans enter into an agreement to work in the vineyard for a day to receive a denarius as the reward (*misthos*)? Nevertheless, as shown earlier, those who criticize the traditional interpretation tend not to recognize either that Jesus' parable does entail elements that feature God's graciousness or that he fashions the story to accomplish more than make this singular point. What, more than God's graciousness, does this earthly story feature?⁵¹

To understand the fuller message of this parable, it is necessary to pose a series of questions that exegetes regularly fail to raise, it seems, because so many tend to restrict meaning of a parable to only a single point.⁵² Why does Jesus stage his parable as he does? In his parable of the kingdom of heaven, why does he present workers in a vineyard agreeing to receive a wage for their labors, if his gospel does not teach that one merits eternal life? Why does he figuratively represent God with the *atypically generous man* who throughout the whole day contracts more hires whom he sends to work in his vineyard? Then, why does Jesus introduce another unexpected feature but this time with a twist when he portrays this *atypically generous man* as purposefully provoking the first laborers hired to object to his generosity which renders the later workers their equals by his inverting distribution of the equal reward requiring them to remain until last as they wait expectantly for a larger sum while watching as the other workers receive a full denarius, their own agreed upon wage set at dawn? To be sure, reception of the same reward by the eleventh-hour laborers features the good vineyard owner's generosity. Yet, because Jesus gives his parable this unexpected twist he diverts attention away from the last workers hired to the first and to their sense of inequity triggered by the generous equal pay given to all, there must be something more that this parable conveys than God's generosity.

As shown early in this essay, it is paramount that we understand that Jesus' parables are earthly analogies of heavenly things. The heavenly things

themselves bear both similarities and dissimilarities to the earthly analogies Jesus sketches with his parables. The parables themselves restrict the analogous features so that only those whose hearing and vision are impaired will insist upon literalizing the various aspects of Jesus' stories, thus brutalizing his parables to their own harm.

As avowed earlier, Jesus' staging of his story with atypical and unexpected features points us to the message of the parable. Consider these features.

(1) Doubtless the generous vineyard owner figuratively represents God. Why does Jesus have this same *good* vineyard owner invert the order of pay inciting those first contracted for one denarius for a day's labor to complain about equity? Why would a *good man* deliberately strain the human sense of justice for some by lavishing generosity upon others? Why would Jesus include such an element concerning a man who represents God? Why does Jesus tell parables with unexpected twists? One could ask why Jesus presents himself analogous to one who breaks into a strong man's house to plunder his property after tying up the strong man (Matt 12:29). Or, one could ask why Jesus portrays himself as a thief who comes unexpectedly at night (Matt 24:43-44). Is Jesus a thief? Clearly Jesus embeds unexpected twists and turns into his parables to arrest attention to the message he conveys through his stories not that every feature finds tit-for-tat correspondence to the heavenly kingdom.⁵³

(2) Ponder the unusual order of distributing the identical and impartial wage (*misthos*). He inverts the order of pay by sending to the back those who expected to be at the front of the line to receive their agreed upon wage, and he brings to the front those who expected to be at the back. So the first hired sent to the back of the line now watch expectantly, anticipating a wage larger than agreed upon at dawn, given the owner's generosity. The sameness of the wage for all, regardless of longevity in the vineyard, signals that the reward (*misthos*) figuratively depicts eternal life,

which the Rich Young Ruler expressed a desire to inherit. Jesus figuratively represents the equal giving of salvation, the salvation about which the disciples inquired when they asked, “Who, then, is able to be saved?” (Matt 19:25).⁵⁴

(3) Reflect on the owner’s unexpected generosity as he dispenses the identical wage to all his workers, including those hired an hour before sunset. The sameness of the wage eliminates the notion that Jesus’ parable teaches that eternal life is merited. What a strange merit system this would be, for regardless of labors expended no one earns either more or less than another. God’s gift is lavish and right, for he who gives generously will never be anyone’s debtor, because he who gives justly always gives more than anyone deserves.

(4) Consider, therefore, the irony of the protest offered by the first employed workers when the owner’s equity incites their complaint of inequity: “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 lavish reward for those who labored less provokes the objection erupting from the first-hour laborers’ sense of inequity. This feature of the parable calls upon Jesus’ disciples to assess “how far their sympathetic reactions are still governed by human ideals” of proportional reward “rather than God’s uncalculating generosity.”⁵⁵

(5) Again, following their protestation of being rendered equal with the later employees, examine the dialog that ensues between the first workers hired and the owner of the vineyard. The owner is right to defend himself, “Friend, I am doing you no injustice.”⁵⁶ After all, the first laborers can only nod affirmatively when the owner asks, “Did you not agree with me upon a denarius?” It is noteworthy that the owner of the vineyard neither removes the denarius from those who express jealousy, signifying loss of eternal life, nor banishes them to punishment, signifying expulsion from the kingdom. Instead, he says, “Take what is yours and go. I desire to give to this last one even as to you.” Is Jesus teaching, therefore, that

the kingdom of heaven will provide sanctuary for people who demand exacting proportional reward and grumble with envious protection of privilege for themselves because salvation is equally given to all without discrimination? Surely he is not. Rather, the design of the parable is to dispel such notions from disciples *now*, for the reward will be all of grace.

(6) It now becomes evident that by telling his parable, Jesus reinforces his response to Peter’s query when he inquires, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will there be for us?” (Matt 19:27). Jesus responds to Peter not by rebuking but by assuring the disciples that their inheritance will be extravagantly disproportionate to what they have left behind to follow Christ, for they will receive back a hundredfold of all they have left on account of Christ and they will inherit eternal life in the age to come. The inheritance received equally by all suffices lavishly. The dialog with Peter triggered by Jesus’ comments following the exchange with the Rich Young Ruler is the backdrop against which Jesus tells his parable to dispel any lingering sense that equal inheritance of such lavish recompense may constitute inequity for disciples who abandon much to follow Christ.

In the Last Day, in keeping with the promise of eternal life, Jesus proclaims in the gospel of the kingdom, God will give the reward of eternal life alike to everyone who enters the kingdom.⁵⁷ Receipt of the reward by those who enter late features the *disproportional lavishness* of God’s gift of eternal life in his kingdom while receipt of the reward by those who enter early features the *indisputable justice* of God’s gift of eternal life within his dominion. He gives the salvation he promises. The first-hour workers no less than those who worked one hour within this vineyard parable figuratively represent individuals who have entered into the kingdom of heaven who will at last also inherit the life of the kingdom, the eternal life about which the rich young ruler inquired. No one receives less than what is right, and all

receive more than deserved. No one is cheated, for God's lavish gift of eternal life will never wane by being distributed. Early or late entrance into the kingdom does not enlarge or reduce the reward to be inherited in the Last Day, for God's gift is lavish, disproportionate to human labors, and just.

The parable serves as a warning to banish now every vain notion that would protect supposed privilege because of how much one has forsaken on account of the kingdom. Its purpose is not to provide an advanced pictorial preview of the Last Day with some disciples actually grumbling in that Day against God's equity and lavish generosity but yet awarded eternal life. In that Day there will be no room for privilege and rank, for anyone who has ears to hear will take heed that the rightness and lavishness of God now and evermore banishes every imagination that he will give the reward of eternal life with proportionality either to longevity in the kingdom or to how much one abandons to follow Christ.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Inheriting eternal life comes by way of radical devotion to Christ that, for some, such as the Rich Young Ruler, requires forsaking all one's earthly goods to follow Christ (Matt 19:16ff). Accordingly, when Jesus speaks of wealth blocking the entrance into the kingdom and offers the saying concerning the camel passing through the eye of a needle, the Twelve respond, "Who, then, is able to be saved?" (19:25). Jesus' response—"With humans this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (19:26)—grounds hope for Peter who asks the question on behalf of his fellow disciples, "Look, we have left everything and followed you" (19:27), and receives assurance that everyone who forsakes all earthly things for Christ's sake will receive back one hundredfold and eternal life. Jesus teaches his followers to regard eternal life as a *prospective gift or reward of incentive*, not as *retrospective wages earned or merited*.

Jesus offers the proverbial saying—"But many

who are first will be last, and last ones first" (19:30)—to contrast the presumed destinies of individuals based on appearances in the present age. The saying provides smooth segue to the Generous Vineyard Owner given as a fuller response to Peter's question to chasten any lingering misconception concerning reward in the kingdom.

So, within Matthew's narrative the Generous Vineyard Owner connects back through the proverbial saying of 19:30 with Jesus' call for selfless sacrifice in order to inherit eternal life, explicitly present in his exchange with the rich ruler (19:16-21) and in his dialog with his disciples (19:22-30), especially once Peter offers his inquiry, speaking for the Twelve. Thus, the traditional interpretation of the parable is on track even if it stops short of the parable's full meaning when exegetes and commentators contend that the parable portrays God as gracious and merciful who gives eternal life without merit.

Yet, the second half of the parable is both unnecessary and confusing, if Jesus designed the parable simply to present God's gift as gracious and unmerited. Therefore, exegetes who see multiple points being presented in this parable are more fully on target.

The parable does not present a singular point but features a cluster of three primary points: (1) the *extravagance* of God's gift of salvation that knows no reduction in its dispensing; (2) the *equality* of God's singular and indivisible reward of eternal life; and (3) the *equity* of God's equal and extravagant reward of life to all his people. Indeed, eternal life to be inherited in the Last Day will be *lavishly given* not earned. God will distribute to all his people in the age to come the indivisible gift of eternal life *identically* not proportionally either to how long one is active in the kingdom or to how much one forsakes on account of Christ in this present age. God's awarding salvation in that Day will be *just*, for no one will be cheated or treated unfairly because God's lavish reward does not deplete with distribution.

Thus, the parable banishes as vain any notion that proximity to Christ, early entrance into the kingdom, or how much one forsakes on account of Christ will result in ranking at the head of the line at the judgment. The reward of eternal life to be inherited in the Last Day is God's lavish gift, unmerited, indivisible, and just, that he will distribute equally to every follower of Christ and dispense without measure, without depleting the reservoir of his reward so that whether last or first all receive the same lavish gift, and God does this without becoming indebted to anyone.⁵⁹

ENDNOTES

¹Cf. Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4-7.

²C. L. Mitton observes, "In the first edition of his book on 'The Parables of Jesus' Jeremias called this parable by its conventional title: 'The Workers in the Vineyard'. In the 1963 English Edition, however, he changed it to 'The Good Employer', and that places the emphasis where it belongs" ("Expounding the Parables: VII. The Workers in the Vineyard [Matthew 20:1-16]," *The Expository Times* 77 [1966]: 309).

³Erich H. Kiehl ("Why Jesus Spoke in Parables," *Concordia Journal* 16 [1990]: 245-57) does much to perpetuate this mistaken notion concerning why Jesus taught with parables. Kiehl states,

The Gospels do not record Jesus speaking parables in the usual meaning of the term in the earlier part of His ministry. But later on, during His great Galilean ministry, because of His hearers' false view of the Messiah, Jesus began to speak in parables. In so doing, He tried in this way to get them to think and ponder what He was actually telling them. . . .

Since Jesus' hearers would not listen to Him on His terms, that is, the true meaning of the kingdom of God as revealed in Scripture, Jesus then began to speak in parables. His hearers had an innate love for graphic

stories and pictorial speech. Jesus used this appealing parabolic approach to catch their attention and to seek to get them to ponder the true meaning of what He said (246, 259).

⁴For categorization of Jesus' parables see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 9-15.

⁵"You will indeed hear and not understand, and you will indeed see and not perceive. For the heart of this people has become calloused, and with their ears they barely hear, and their eyes they have shut, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and they turn and I heal them" (Matt 13:14, 15; cited from Isa 6:9, 10).

⁶On Matthew's use of Psalm 78:2 to explain Jesus' teaching the crowds in parables, D. A. Carson is particularly instructive. See D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (vol. 8; ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 320-23. As the psalmist brings together well known "things from of old" but in such a manner as to disclose things that have been concealed or hidden, enigmatic, and riddle like, laying the Lord's righteous acts of redemption alongside Israel's privilege and rebellion, so Jesus teaches in parables things formerly hidden. Clearly, "things formerly hidden" no longer remain concealed as formerly because Jesus now reveals them, albeit in parables that sustain a certain quality of concealment in Jesus' revelation. Surely, as Carson points out, Jesus does not reveal things that have formerly been hidden so that they will remain hidden. Yet, as Jesus teaches in parables the very act of revealing entails some measure of concealing as made evident by Matt 13:11-14. "Taken as a whole, Jesus' parables preserve the expectation of the apocalyptic coming of Messiah. They also introduce a new pattern of an inaugurated kingdom that anticipates the Parousia. Moreover this pattern rests on Jesus' self-understanding as the Messiah who unites in himself streams of revelation from the old covenant that had not been so clearly united before" (322).

⁷See *ibid.*, 322-23.

⁸Of the three Synoptic Gospels, Mark emphatically underscores the feature of hearing by bracketing

Jesus' telling of the parable with the words, "Listen.... Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear" (4:3, 9).

⁹Simply because the proverbial statement of Matt 13:12—"For whoever has to him will be given even more; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him"—is found with slight variation elsewhere (Matt 25:29; Mark 4:25), is no reason to assume that it is to be read as generalized here. Given use of the same verbs in 13:11 (*humīn dedotai gnōnai ta mystēria*) it is more likely that 13:12 refers to the *giving of knowing, discerning*.

¹⁰Howard L. Parsons, "The Commitments of Jesus and Marx: Resources for the Challenge and Necessity of Cooperation," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23 (1985): 467.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 462. Parsons claims that Jesus strives for a society that "is similar to Marx's 'higher stage' of communism in which the rule is: 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.'" In a somewhat less overt manner, Robert Fortna advances the notion that the parable rebukes economic inequities. "In opposing social evil, the church must address its root economic cause. And what is called for is no economic program, no simple espousal of a Marxist system, but rather a Marxian dethroning of the reigning economic ideology. In this respect Marx and Jesus are in agreement" ("Exegesis and Proclamation: 'You have made them equal to us!' [Mt 20:1-16]," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 72 [1990]: 70-71).

¹²See Philip Culbertson, "Reclaiming the Matthean Vineyard Parables," *Encounter* 49 (1988): 264. Culbertson assails William Barclay as "blatantly anti-Semitic" (265).

¹³*Ibid.*, 267.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 265. Culbertson reasons, "The Nimshal [the point of the parable] unquestionably has no relation to the Mashal [the parable story], for the Mashal is not about the reversal of fortunes; it is rather a Mashal about the equality of all creatures, and about God's autonomy in rewarding obedience.... In no instance ... is there a suggestion that an appropriate Nimshal might be "the last will be first and the first last." With the Nimshal removed, the parable makes complete sense as spoken by a Jew to a Second

Temple Jewish audience, about their responsibilities within the Vineyard, the House of Israel, and about God's generous providence."

¹⁵See, e.g., J. Duncan Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard: A Parable of Jesus," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974): 64-91.

¹⁶For example, see Fortna ("Exegesis and Proclamation," 66) who states, "The parable itself extends only through v. 15. The moral that follows in v. 16 ('Therefore, the last will be first and the first last') is hardly original; rather, it collides with the thrust of the story ('You have made them equal to us'—v. 12b). Its addition by 'Matthew'—or possibly someone earlier in the process of handing on the oral tradition stemming from Jesus—seems to have been occasioned by its superficial parallel to the relatively incidental phrase in the story, 'beginning with the last up to the first' (8c). The saying is found elsewhere as an independent logion of Jesus (Mk 10:31, Lk 13:30); in Mt it appears immediately before this story (19:30) so as, with v. 16, to frame it."

¹⁷In Matt 20:16 the King James Version reflects a longer reading with the inclusion of a second proverbial statement, "for many be called but few are chosen." Modern translations accept the shorter reading and do not include the longer. If the longer reading was original scribes may have dropped it by homeoteleuton, the repetition of endings. It is equally plausible to explain the inclusion of the additional words by assimilation to Matt 22:14.

¹⁸Snodgrass's reasoning seems circuitous: "Although v. 16 begins with *houtōs* ('thus'), I do not think it is intended to be the *nimshal* of the parable [the point or message of the parable]. It is, rather, placed here as a reminder of the point that dominates 19:13-20:34. *Gar* ('for') in 20:1 shows that Matthew saw the parable as in some way an example of the proverb, which indicates that human perceptions on ranking are without significance and will be stood on their heads in the kingdom, which is indeed the message of the parable" (*Stories with Intent*, 371-72).

¹⁹On expressions such as *homoia estin*, see D. A. Carson, "The ΟΜΟΙΟΣ Word-Group as Introduction to Some Matthean Parables," *New Testament Studies*

31 (1985): 277. He points out that the usual translation—"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed"—does not draw the analogy out sufficiently. Instead, he proposes translating, "The kingdom of heaven is like the case of a man who sows etc."

²⁰Modern translations do not translate *anthrōpō* in Matt 20:1. The KJV translated, "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man *that is* an householder" (likewise the ASV). Matt 13:24 (*anthōpō speiranti*), 28 (*echthros anthrōpos*), 44 (*anthōpō emporō*), 52 (*anthōpō oikodespotē*); 18:23 (*anthrōpō basilei*); 20:1 (*anthōpō oikodespotē*); 22:2 (*anthrōpō basilei*).

²¹The TNIV translates Matt 20:1, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning."

²²For example, see William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 79-97. Herzog argues that Jesus' parable addresses abuse of peasants by wealthy landowners. For a brief critique of Herzog's proposal, see Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 372-73. Snodgrass observes, "Herzog's approach is an example of one laying the culture over the text, rather than letting the text lie in its culture, and then bending the text to one's own ideology" (373).

²³"The Laborers of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16): A Hispanic Homiletical Reading," *Journal for Preachers* 21 (1997): 38. Characteristic of many exegetes, Jiménez imposes onto the text things that Jesus neither mentions nor assumes. So, Jiménez claims, "The landowner ... pays all the workers 'the usual daily wage' (v. 2), knowing that they needed at least that amount to take care of their families. The understandable complaint of the laborers who toiled all day long exemplifies the attitude of those who judge according to the prevalent social values (vv. 9-15)" (38). Evidently Jiménez believes that human employers who pay human workers proportionally to work expended do injustice. He concludes that a sermon on the parable would make the main topic "God's love for the poor" and would "stress God's love for all Hispanics—particularly for those who can be seen in cities like Austin and Los Angeles waiting

by the street to be hired. It would also describe the clash between the values of human sociopolitical systems and the values of God's reign" (39). Jiménez consciously rejects the caution Joachim Jeremias issues, "Why did Jesus tell the parable? Was it his object to extol God's mercy to the poor? If that were so he might have omitted the second part of the parable (v 11ff)" (*The Parables of Jesus* [London: SCM, 1954], 27).

²⁴John Dominic Crossan misses the parable's meaning by contending that the point is neither justice nor mercy but simply that the kingdom of heaven will be unexpected (*In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* [New York: Harper & Row, 1973], 114-15).

²⁵Characteristic of those who reject the Christian church's understanding of the parable as presenting salvation under the imagery of an indivisible reward disproportionate to labors expended is Karen Lebacqz, "Justice, Economics, and the Uncomfortable Kingdom: Reflections on Matthew 20:1-16," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1983): 31-32. Lebacqz concludes, "[F]or me, this parable addresses the way we interpret the world and develop expectations. What do we do when our calculations are wrong and our expectations are disappointed?" (38-39).

²⁶Whether a denarius was a fair wage (so Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard," 68) or a generous wage (so Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* [London: SPCK, 1966], 68) is inconsequential, for those hired last a denarius was certainly a generous wage, given the fact that the dawn-hired-laborers agreed to one denarius, obviously what they deemed equitable.

²⁷For many exegetes the vineyard owner's repeated returns to the marketplace to hire more laborers, but especially the later hires, indicates that it was the day before the Sabbath when the grapes were at their peak to be harvested (e.g., Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard," 71-72). This is utterly extraneous to Jesus' parable.

²⁸Lebacqz, "Justice, Economics, and the Uncomfortable Kingdom," 34.

²⁹Derrett, "Workers in the Vineyard," 71.

³⁰Norman A. Huffman ably shows that we have no

assurance that paying a minimum wage was in force at the time of Jesus and that Derrett's reconstruction of the parable is just that, his own story more than Jesus' story ("Atypical Features in the Parables," *Journal of Biblical Literature* [1978]: 209-10).

³¹Ibid., 209.

³²H. A. W. Meyer expresses this point of departure from earlier exegetes. He states, "The proposition: 'that in dispensing the blessings of the kingdom of heaven, God takes no account of human merit, but that all is the result of His own free grace ... does not constitute the *leading thought* set forth in the parable, though, no doubt, it may be supposed to underlie it.'" (*Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Gospel of Matthew* [trans. Peter Christie; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884], 352). Meyer's reasons for his statement are less persuasive than his insightful observation.

³³As indicated earlier, use of "Is your eye jealous because I am *good*?" is a catchword linking the parable to the narrative concerning The Rich Young Man who inquired, "Teacher, what *good thing* must I do in order that I might have eternal life?" and Jesus responded, "Why do you inquire concerning *the good thing*? Only one is *the Good One*" (Matt 19:17, 18).

³⁴The expression within the question, "Is *your eye evil*" (*ho ophthalmos sou ponēros*) occurs also in Matt 6:23. It is an idiom referring to jealousy. For the idiom, see also Deut 15:9; 1 Sam 18:9. Given the idiomatic expression for jealousy in Matt 20:15, the *goodness* of the vineyard owner bears the sense of "generous." See also note 1 above.

³⁵Cf. Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 127. Stein, however, seems to overstate his case when he rejects the interpretation "that Jesus in the parable seeks to demonstrate that salvation is by grace alone. This interpretation has had a continual succession of proponents since the time of Luther. Yet not only does this look like a reading of this basic Reformation issue into the parable, it is refuted by the fact that the first workers clearly earned their denarius or 'salvation.' Are we to conclude that some people are saved by grace alone (eleventh hour); some people

completely earn their salvation on an agreed-upon basis (first workers); and others obtain their salvation by various combinations of works and grace (third, sixth, and night hours)? This is clearly not a correct interpretation of the parable" (127). Stein seems to sense his exaggeration for he adds a note: "Since I have said that the parable does not teach the doctrine of 'justification by faith,' it nevertheless must be observed that it does teach the graciousness and mercy of God which is one of the essential foundations upon which the doctrine of justification by faith is built" (165, n. 38).

³⁶See note 17 above.

³⁷Luke's account has Peter claiming, "Look, we have left behind homes to follow you" (Luke 18:28).

³⁸Mitton, "Expounding the Parables," 308. Mitton adds, "Moreover, it is clear that the choice of context is Matthew's. He introduces into a Markan context a piece of material which he apparently knew as an independent unit, without any context, and places it where he thinks its meaning will fit most appropriately." If one grants Mitton's assumptions, then his conclusions are clear.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Craig L. Blomberg observes, "Surely J. B. Bauer is correct to stress that the parable teaches not the reversal of order but the abandonment of every form of ordering. All is based on mercy" (*Interpreting the Parables* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990], 222. Blomberg refers to J. B. Bauer, "Gnadenlohn oder Tageslohn (Mt 20,8-16)," *Biblica* 42 (1961), 224-28.

⁴¹The epigram in Mark 9:35—"If someone wishes to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." R. T. France proposes that use of the proverb in Mark 10:31 is a gentle rebuke to Peter rather than referring to "those like the rich young man, whose comfortable situation in life might make them seem first" (*The Gospel of Mark* [New International Commentary on the Greek Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002]), 408.

⁴²On Mark 10:31 see James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 317. Com-

menting upon the chiasmic saying, Edwards notes, “Its simplicity captures a profound irony of discipleship. The kingdom of God topples our cherished priorities and demands new ones. It takes from those who follow Jesus things they would keep, and gives to them things they could not imagine. Those who take their stand on the riches—whatever they be—will have nothing to stand on. Those who give up everything—not only possessions but even people and places, indeed their own lives (8:35)—to follow Jesus will not simply be compensated for their sacrifices but surfeited a hundred times over with the same, and in the world to come with eternal life.”

⁴³Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (2 vols.; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:1240. Bock offers a comment on Matt 20:16 which suggests that in his mind he conflated the Generous Vineyard Owner with the Tenants of the Vineyard in Matt 21:33-46. He states, “Matt. 20:16 deals with the taking of the kingdom from the vineyard keepers in order to give it to another, a point similar to Luke’s” (n. 20).

⁴⁴Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (New International Commentary on the Greek Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 568. See also Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 380. Stein observes, “The lack of the article before ‘last’ and ‘first’ indicates that neither all the last nor all the first would experience this reversal. Some Jews . . . did believe. The saying contrasts not all the last and all the first but ‘last ones’ kinds of people and ‘first ones’ kinds of people.”

⁴⁵Cf. Alan P.1 Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in Salvation in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 193. On Matt 19:30, Stanley observes, “The saying is somewhat ambiguous but seems to summarize the irony of the situation with general application. The Rich Young Ruler who had everything appeared to be first and the disciples who had left everything appeared to be last. However the reverse is in fact true. The last will be first and the first will be last.”

⁴⁶Cf. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New Inter-

national Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 751. France observes, “This parable, unlike that of 21:28-32, does not depict people outside the kingdom of heaven, those for whom there is no reward at all. It is about equality among disciples rather than about insiders and outsiders.” (n. 22).

⁴⁷Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 399.

⁴⁸Cf. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 224.

⁴⁹John Calvin appeals to this parable as he explains, “But lest we should think that the reward the Lord promises us is reduced to a matter of merit, he has set forth a parable.” He quotes Pseudo-Ambrose (*The Call of the Gentiles*) who interprets the parable and concludes, “For he does not pay the price of their labor but showers the riches of his goodness upon those whom he has chosen apart from works. Thus they also . . . who sweated in much labor, and did not receive more than the latecomers, should understand that they received a gift of grace, not the reward for their works” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 3.18.3).

⁵⁰The traditional understanding of the parable since the Reformation receives modern expression by Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (trans. by Irene and Fraser McLuskey; New York: Harper & Row, 1960; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Bornkamm states, “The idea of the merit of good works and man’s claim upon God is most clearly shaken and abolished in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt. xx.1-16).... Thus the idea of reward has received a completely new meaning. Detached from deeds of merit and the claims of man, it has become an expression of divine justice and grace, to which man is directed, now more than ever called to effort and faithfulness, and on which he must lean” (142-43).

⁵¹Blomberg categorizes this parable among “complex three-point parables” (*Interpreting the Parables*, 221-25). He identifies the three main points: (1) arrangements with the earlier groups of workers hired portray that none of God’s people will be treated

inequitably; (2) arrangement with the last group of workers hired underscores God's generosity born out of freedom to give as he wishes; and (3) equal distribution of the same reward indicates that all genuine disciples are equal before God (225).

⁵²Blomberg objects to this tendency: "Commentators who restrict the meaning of a parable to only one main point invariably try to excise one or more of these verses [vv. 13-14a, vv. 14b-15, and v. 16] as later appendices. If a parable can make three points, then the entire passage fits together as a tightly knit unity" (ibid.).

⁵³For several of Jesus' parables that employ unexpected features and exaggeration in various ways, see Huffman, "Atypical Features in the Parables," 207-20.

⁵⁴On reward as life in the kingdom, not a proportional gradation of heavenly awards, see Craig L. Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992): 159-72. On pages 160-62 he focuses upon Matt 20:1-16. See also Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 221-25.

⁵⁵France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 748.

⁵⁶"Friend," as used in Matthew's Gospel, bears a wry touch of irony (cf. 22:12; 26:50). Cf. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 370.

⁵⁷Blomberg makes the case that the use of "evening" or "twelfth-hour imagery" represents the Last Day (*Interpreting the Parables*, 224). He refers to Hans Weder, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu als Metaphern* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 223.

⁵⁸G. De Ru believes that Jesus formulated the parable and aimed it originally against the scribes and Pharisees but that Matthew redirects it to Peter. "This parable, which was originally directed against the scribes and Pharisees, was repeatedly applied by the early Christians to Jesus' own followers, that is the Church itself. The way in which the Evangelist connects it with Peter's question (Matth. xix 27) clearly shows this" ("The Conception of Reward in the Teaching of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 8 [1966]: 209-10).

⁵⁹David McClister sees Matt 17:22-20:19 as an elaborate chiasm with the Vineyard parable subsumed

within 19:16-20:16, which correlates to 17:24-27 ("Where Two or Three are Gathered Together": Literary Structure as a Key to Meaning in Matt 17:22-20:19," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 [1996]: 549-58). His observation concerning the role of the vineyard parable within the context is on target: "A paradox is thus highlighted: The way of sacrifice and selflessness is the way to abundance and glory; the way of loss is the way to gain. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard that immediately follows, however, tempers our understanding of this concept. Reward in the kingdom is not a matter of piling up a great number of meritorious sacrificial works. It is a matter of grace" (553).