

# A Preposterous Parable

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September 25, 1990

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Mt. 20: 1-16:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you. So, they went. Going out again about the sixth and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first. And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying, 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.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' So, the last will be first, and the first last.

This is a preposterous parable. The National Labor Relations Board would find it preposterous.

The United Farm Workers, whose crucial struggle is precisely against owners of vineyards who think they can do whatever they please with what is theirs, would find it preposterous. Those of us who were brought up with the belief that life is essentially fair and have had a hard time coming to the realization that it isn't so, will find it particularly preposterous, for now we are being told that even the kingdom of heaven isn't fair! Preposterous!

Actually, Jesus himself says that the parable is preposterous in the literal sense. "Pre/posterous" means precisely that: putting first, "pre," that which is supposed to be last, "posterous." A cart before a horse is preposterous. Yet, this is precisely the point that Jesus is making in this parable: the kingdom of heaven is preposterous, or, as he says, "the last will be first, and the first last."

And **that** is the **real** reason why I find this parable preposterous. I find it preposterous because I identify with those who were hired early in the morning. Those others who were hired at the eleventh hour did not protest. They may have found the master's behavior somewhat eccentric, but they would have rejoiced at such eccentricity. It is the long-term workers, the faithful ones, those who have endured the heat of the day, who have reason to protest.

Most of us, like them, have been hired at an early hour. Many of us were born in the church. We have studied theology. We have preached the Gospel. We are pastors. We know how to do sound exegesis. We are distinguished professors of a distinguished seminary. We have preached sermons. We have written books. We have preached and we have written about the rule of God. Certainly, when that Reign comes, there should be stars on our crown!

And then, as we go on merrily along the path of our devoted spiritual life, or along the path of our exceptional scholarship, Jesus tosses this parable like a stumbling block right at our feet. You who presume on your faithful service, you who presume on your call to the ministry, you

who presume on your stringent scholarship, remember, says the parable, the last will be first, and the first last.

This is the good news of the Gospel. Good news? Hardly so. Hardly so as long as we consider ourselves worthy servants, faithful pastors, able scholars, and trust in that worthiness, that faithfulness, or that ability.

But good news indeed for all of us, who no matter how much we seek to hide it, know deep down that we are not that worthy, that we are not that faithful, that we are not that able. Good news for all of us who know that no matter whether we are professors, students, pastors, or even saints, we are all workers of the last hour. Good news that, thanks to this preposterous grace of God, when the time of judgment comes, we shall be paid a full denarius, not according to the unworthy servants we are, but according to the amazing and preposterous grace of the master of the vineyard.