

GOD'S APPRAISALS AND REWARDS

THE PARABLE OF THE LABORERS AND THE HOURS

"For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that was a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a shilling a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing in the marketplace idle; and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. And when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the laborers and pay them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a shilling. And when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received every man a shilling. And when they received it, they murmured against the householder, saying, These last have spent but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. But he answered and said to one of them, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a shilling? Take up that which is thine, and go thy way; it is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? or is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last."

(*Matthew 20: 1-16*)

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The Parable of the Laborers and the Hours

"But many shall be last that are first; and first that are last." These are impressive words—"that solemn sentence inscribed by Scripture on the curtain which hangs down before the judgment seat."¹ But it is doubtful if they carve from the average mind any clear or true concept. We read them and think of blind Fate playing havoc with our careful plans; of Kismet lifting a beggar from his rags to a throne, and then capriciously, inscrutably, flinging him down again to his beggar's mat; or of some Cynic Spirit delighting to prick the bubble of human pride or success. But Jesus spoke the words, and He granted no place in the universe either to blind Fate or to a sneering Cynic.

We may beset this precept "behind and before," and reach its meaning through the incident and parable which respectively precede and follow it in the Gospel record.²

When the Rich Young Ruler inquired some formula or rubric which would guarantee eternal life, Jesus saw that only a relentless surgery would cure his ills: "Go, sell that which thou hast and give to the poor . . . and come, follow me." The sorrowful refusal awakened an answering sorrow in Jesus—sorrow that a would-be disciple of such promise was lost to the kingdom. But He could not abate the rigor of the terms: "I tell you truly, it will be difficult for a rich man to get into the Realm of heaven."³ Then Peter interjected, "Well, *we*

¹ Mozley quoted in the "Expositor's Dictionary of Texts," Vol. I, p. 911.

² There is no certainty that the parable was spoken in reply to Peter's question or to clarify the apothegm in Mark 10: 31, Matthew 19: 30. The most cursory acquaintance with the synoptic problem scouts such dogmatism. But whether by actual chronology, or by the Evangelist's arrangement of his material, the context of the parable supplies a perfect setting. Peake's Commentary seems far too sweeping in its remark that Matthew 19: 30 has no bearing on the parable that follows, though it is convincing in its contention that there are discernible two interpretations of the parable, *viz.*, that intended by Jesus and that suggested by the Evangelist. See footnote on p. 162.

³ Matthew 19: 23 (Moffatt's Translation).

have left our all and followed you"—there was emphasis on the pronoun to imply contrast with the Rich Young Ruler; "We have left our all. Now what are we to get?"⁴

It was a taut moment! How should Jesus reply? Peter and the other disciples *had* forsaken their "all" for His sake, and such an adventure of soul (He must make clear) would not be without its splendid consequence. In the "new world"⁵ they would be enthroned. But there was a bargaining streak in Peter's question and a complacent self-justifying at the expense of the Young Ruler. "You shall be enthroned," said Jesus in effect, "if your sacrifice is a sacrifice and not a calculation. But it were wisdom not to judge either your own merit or another's failure. The kingdom will show surprising reversals of human estimates. Many shall be last that are first; and first that are last."

The parable which follows clarifies and illustrates the maxim. Its hero is a vineyard-keeper. He will scarcely qualify as an efficient business man. He might almost be called an eccentric humorist. He engages workmen when the sun is setting, and when the sun has set he pays them a full day's wage. Moreover, he seems to attach less importance to the "production-capacity" of his workmen than to their motives and their need. An efficiency expert would risk insanity by visiting this vineyard. Hiring help at the eleventh hour and paying them *in* full! There have been those (in the bad old days now passing) who thought it better business to dismiss employees and then, when hunger began to pinch their homes, reengage them at lower wages! But we run ahead of our story. . . .

Behold the master going into the market place at six o'clock in the morning to hire laborers. If it is spring, soil must be carried up the steep slope, or the ground dug, or an encompassing wall built. If it is summer, the vines must be pruned and tied. If it is autumn, the golden vintage must be gathered. He needs men, and, since it is early in the day, they can bargain with him at their own terms. He agrees to pay them a denarius a day. Three hours later he engages others who,

⁴ Matthew 19: 27. (Moffatt's Translation).

⁵ "The regeneration" (Moffatt: "the new world") is an interesting term used by Josephus to express the return of Israel from captivity. See Peake's Commentary, *in loc.*

being in a less favorable situation to parley, accept his assurance that they will be paid a fair wage.⁶ Twelve noon and three in the afternoon witness a similar hiring, on the strength of a similar assurance. Five o'clock finds him again in the market place. The shadows lengthen. A few men wait disconsolately for work. Appraising them with a quick glance (were they loafers or unemployed?) he flings the question, "Why are you idle?" They might have made excuses, pleading the sweltering heat. They might have cursed the economic order. But they reply with the ring of truth, "Because nobody has hired us." "You go too into my vineyard," was the curt instruction. Strange efficiency!

This parable is not an economic tract. Jesus did not attempt to lay the rails on which the trains of industry should run. He lived instead a life so divinely compassionate that industry must ultimately make peace with Him or suffer torment. But, though this parable does not prescribe industrial methods, we cannot read it, even casually, without seeing the fingers of Jesus probing beneath the surface of the vast realm of "business." Is a man out of work because he will not work? Jesus has no saving grace for such a man except the saving grace of adversity. Is a man out of work because of the callousness of a society which will not seriously grapple with the curse of unemployment? That tragedy smites Jesus to the core! He could never have told this story if He had not been moved with pity as He saw men idle in the market place. What would Jesus say, were He here in the flesh, to the corporation which dismisses men without direst necessity; or to a labor union which "strikes" on a negligible pretext; or to business brains too absorbed with profits to address themselves to the poor man's problem of insecurity of occupation? This is not an economic tract; but it is a demand that industry shall exist for man, and not man for industry.

At sunset the laborers in the vineyard receive their wages. Those who were hired last were paid first (the vineyard keeper's eccentric humor comes into play); and to their glad surprise they receive a denarius, a full day's wage. Those who

⁶ "Right" in v. 4 seems to mean "proportionate."

worked three hours, six, or nine, are given the same amount. Finally those who have worked all day—a denarius is their payment! The agreement is fulfilled; they bargained for a denarius. But the good fortune of those who have worked one hour, three or nine, excites their ill-tempered complaint: "These last have worked only one hour, but you have made them equal with us who have borne the brunt of the day's work and the heat." But the leader of the revolt is promptly singled out and silenced: "Friend" (the reproof is not less stern because it is kindly) "I am not wronging you. . . . Be off! . . . Can I not do as I please with what is mine? Have you a grudge because I am generous? So the last shall be first and the first last."

The parable does not mean that the kingdom is a realm of complete equality, or that good fortune is bestowed at the expense of faithful labor, or that God's verdicts are arbitrary. "Can I not do as I will with mine own?" is not a New Testament version of that Old Testament assertion which, in its primitive conception of God lauded His power at the cost of the ethical: "He hath done whatsoever He pleased." The judgments of God are not capricious, but they are based on tests radically different from ours; and because, "My ways are not your ways, saith the Lord," the kingdom plays such havoc with the world's appraisals that the first become the last, and the last first.⁷ Those not of the Kingdom may continue to be self-centered in their judgments ("What shall *we* get therefore?"), or jealous of the good fortune of others, or bereft of sympathy; but God's judgments are not of such a kind.

⁷ Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 169 ff., enumerates various suggested interpretations of the parable. Some commentators have regarded the equality of reward as the clue to the meaning, some have found in it a variant of the fable of the hare and the tortoise, and many have taken the "hours" as its leading feature. The latter group has again been divided into smaller groups according to the manner of allegorizing espoused. To some the "hours" mean the successive dispensations of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and finally the Apostles; to others successive ages of individual man (youth, manhood through to death-bed repentance!); and to others the successive periods of Jew and Gentile or of early and later Church. There are evidences in the parable that the early Church took it as a warning against those who imagined that the fact of earlier discipleship would gain them greater reward than those who heard the good news later. The spurious sentence, "For many are called but few are chosen" (i.e., "many" of the Jewish nation) may have crept in through this interpretation. The sentence does not occur in the Vatican or the Sinaitic MSS. Though some of the allegorizing just instanced may *illustrate* truth in the parable, Trench is right when he writes: "Better . . . to say that the parable is directed against a wrong temper . . . against which all men . . . have need to be . . . warned."

Thus the verdicts of heaven cause amazing reversals in the verdicts of earth.

The parable suggests the standards of Divine judgment. *It is a judgment according to motive.* If one worker bargains for a denarius he shall receive it: "They have received their reward."⁸ If another accepts the assurance of honorable dealing, and pins his faith on the goodwill of God, his faith shall be justified with "good measure, pressed down, running over."⁹ Life, lived abundantly, despises the careful calculation of rewards. It does not ask, "What shall we have therefore?" God is not the Keeper of a ledger entering a credit or debit account, according as a man observes or fails to observe certain holy regulations, according as he registers or fails to register a certain quantity and duration of labor. God has subtler tests than the piece-measure and the time clock. Everlastingly the *motive* of a man's life proclaims his worth.

A man came to Jesus: "Teacher, tell my brother to give me my share of our inheritance."¹⁰ That title "Teacher" was an implied compliment to His wisdom; and was it not right that the estate should be divided? "Take heed, and beware of covetousness," was the stern reply. The man's "rights" were cankered by his motives! That witch of Alexandria, walking the streets armed with a pitcher of water and a flaming torch, and crying, "Would that I could quench hell with this water and burn heaven with this torch, so that men would love God for Himself alone," was mistress of a white magic, not of a black art! Church-going which goes to Church to be wrapped in a warm glow of emotion, or in the hope that Church-going may be counted unto it for righteousness, debases worship into gross selfishness. So many prayers—so much of heaven; so many good deeds—so much reward! The blasphemy of the *quid pro quo* in religion endures in the Pharisaism of every age! Small wonder that in the Reformation the world demanded an ampler doctrine of "grace" instead of the dreary rubric of "works!" The generous soul

. . . "Throws himself on God, and unperplexed
Seeking shall find Him."¹¹

⁸ Matthew 6: 2, 5, 16.

⁹ Luke 6: 38.

¹⁰ Luke 12: 13 (Moffatt's Translation). See Chapter XII of this book.

¹¹ Browning, "A Grammarian's Funeral."

Such souls, in Wordsworth's eyes, were the donor and the architect of King's College Chapel, Cambridge. While penurious spirits wondered if such lavish outpouring of money and talent, on a chapel intended only "for a scanty band of white-robed scholars," would ever be warranted by commensurate returns, the poet rallied to the defence of people who are prodigal for God.

"Give all thou canst; high heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely calculated less or more."¹²

The lines summarize the message of the parable.

Divine judgment, furthermore, is according not alone to the measure of work done but also *according to the measure of opportunity*.¹³ Rewards in heaven are bestowed for handicaps overcome, as well as for goals achieved. Some men in the rash hardihood of their powers can demand terms of the universe. They greet life at the sunrise, and seize the opportunity in resolute hands. They exact their recompense by splendid strength. But others drag crippling chains of inheritance, or beat against confining walls of circumstances. Who will hire them? They would fain serve God, but cannot serve Him as they would. "No man hath hired us." But their intention is accepted as their deed! Though they cannot kindle in a living flame of prophetic speech, though they cannot claim saintliness, though in unrealized hopes they must be content to offer hospitality to the prophet and saint, they are not forgotten in the appraisals of the kingdom: "He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward."¹⁴

In the meridian of his powers and dreams John Milton was robbed of sight. What more could he do than wait disconsolately in life's market-place, hoping that some employer, less efficient by reason of kindness than the rest, would hire him?

"When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent

¹² William Wordsworth, "Inside of King's Chapel, Cambridge."

¹³ G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 127, summarizes this thought ingeniously in the phrase "the equation of character." Opportunity is the denominator of the equation, service its numerator, and character or destiny its quotient.

¹⁴ Matthew 10: 41.

To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide;
'Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?'
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need
Either man's work or His own gifts; who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best; His state
Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.'¹⁵

Some come to the adventure of life eternally young; others are crippled from the start. Some have negligible handicaps; others have a taint in the blood, a pressure of environment, a native feebleness of will, an early thwarting which has left for constant smart an ever open wound. One man leaps to victory; another stubbornly resists the foe a hundred times and then succumbs—and only God knows which of them has truly won the victor's crown! Those whose strength is sure despise the comrade hired at the eleventh hour. "These last—" they murmur; and forget that the "scorching heat" is harder on the man who waits despairingly than on the laborer who toils in assurance of his livelihood! Idleness in appearance may not be idleness in motive. But His judgments are "true and righteous altogether,"¹⁶ and it comes to pass that those who are "first" in the appraisals of men, are sometimes "last" in the verdicts of God.

If only the laborers of the morning hours had offered a part of their ample wage to comrades who, because of weakness, or "the inhumanity of man to man," or fettering circumstance, waited while no one hired them! Then they would have entered into the joy of their Lord, and realized the wise and gentle kingdom in their midst!

¹⁵ Milton's Sonnet on his blindness.

¹⁶ Psalm 19: 9.