

Sermon: Finding Justice in the Vineyard

Year A, Proper 20

[Jonah 3:10-4:11](#); [Psalm 145:1-8](#); [Philippians 1:21-30](#); [Matthew 20:1-16](#)

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There is an interpretation of this parable which some of you may be familiar with. God is the vineyard owner, and we are the workers complaining about others who have done less than we have getting paid the same. Sometimes different groups of people are identified with the first-hireds and others are the eleventh hour people. In this interpretation, Jesus is teaching the disciples that the Kingdom of God is based on grace, not works. We can't do more for God and get a better seat in heaven. We can't earn our way into the Kingdom. The Kingdom isn't a reward for good behavior in this lifetime. The Kingdom of God is a gift from God. And thank heaven for that, because we just can't get out of our own way to earn it.

That's a fine interpretation. If it helps you understand God more thoroughly, it's a worthy interpretation that has been built upon since the second century. Evolution alone says that that interpretation has merit if it has lasted so long. It is certainly consistent with Paul's teaching that it is grace, not works, which matters.

This interpretation depends on identifying the vineyard owner as God. There's good reason to do so. In ancient Israel, they understood that God owned the land. The families who lived on and worked the land were God's tenants. There were laws that specified debts would be erased at certain intervals, because basically all debts were secured with land. There were other laws that said that the land would be returned to its original family every so often. This kept the rich from getting outrageously rich and the poor from being desperately poor. Or they would have done that if they had been strictly followed. But the laws were there and they were understood as God's law, something you had to respect if you were going to be in right relationship with God. Furthermore, the second time the vineyard owner is referred to in this parable, he's called *kyrios*, or lord of the vineyard. Jesus is called *kyrios* too. Once you identify the vineyard owner as God, there are a lot of places you can go with the parable. Grace not works is a great place to go.

But what if the vineyard owner isn't meant to represent God? There are a lot of landowners in the parables of Jesus and none of them represent God. A vineyard is a rich man's venture. You plant the vines and then have to wait 4-5 years before your first crop.¹ Once you do have grapes, you can convert it into a lucrative cash product,² but it takes time and investment to get there. This landowner isn't one of the very few middle class farmers. He has a manager.³ He's really the landed elite, exactly the kind of person who was causing economic upheaval in Palestine at the time of Jesus' ministry, because they didn't believe the land belonged to God. The rich land owners never come off well in Jesus' parables, so it's strange that in this one story the landowner is God. Certainly Jesus' followers referred to him as *kyrios*. But so did Caesar's.

If the vineyard owner isn't God, then the whole interpretation changes. What might Jesus have been saying about the Kingdom of God if this wasn't a grace vs. works story? Jesus is clearly

¹ William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 85.

² Herzog, 85.

³ Herzog, 85.

setting something up for the people who are listening to him. There may have been an elite or two, a Pharisee on the edge of the crowd, but mostly it's going to be two kinds of people: the subsistence farmers who were one bad harvest away from losing their land and the day laborers who already had. It's going to be those kinds of people listening because that's the vast majority of the people in Palestine back then.

Most of the crowd would recognize the situation in the parable. The day laborers gathered in one spot, waiting to be hired. There's a fair amount of discussion in the academic literature about what exactly a denarius would buy. Lots of blah, blah about how it's hard to tell, but basically everyone agrees that it's not generous. It's a subsistence wage, enough to feed you for a day, but maybe not enough to feed a family for a day.⁴ What would have stood out to everyone hearing the parable is that the vineyard owner himself keeps going to the market place.⁵ That's the manager's job, to deal with the laborers.

But the owner goes and for the first group he hires, the ones who will work all 12 hours of the day, he *agrees with the laborers for the usual daily wage* (Matthew 20:2). Think about that for a minute. There are so many people looking for work that there are still people available for hire just before sunset. What kind of bargaining power do any of the laborers have?⁶ The next group doesn't even get to bargain and the last group just gets sent directly into the vineyard.

At the end of the day, the owner is there again, when the manager is paying the workers. That too is unusual. The manager is there to deal with the grief from the laborers so the owner doesn't have to. Yet there the owner is, directing the proceedings. And by paying the last workers first, he's stirring up all kinds of conflict. When the first-hired laborers complain, the owner replies to one of them, "*Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?*" (Matthew 20:13-15).

Just a quick word on the Greek. If the owner had seen the laborer he singled out as an equal, he would have used a different word. This "friend" is condescending, reinforces the distance between them and pretends to be civil.⁷ Kind of like when congress people say "our friends across the aisle." Think about the rest of the reply. *Did you not agree?* How could they have really agreed? There were so many people looking for work. *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?* But why does it belong to him? Some Jewish family used to own that land and live off what it produced. Now it just produces luxury goods for a man who has far more than he needs.⁸ This whole reply is simply another humiliation.

When the owner paid the eleventh hour workers first, in front of the guys who had worked much longer and paid them the same, he's saying how much he values their work.⁹ Twelve hours of work in the scorching heat (Matthew 20:12) or one. It's all worth the same to the owner. It's all

⁴ Lewis R. Donelson, "Proper 20, Exegetical Perspective, Matthew 20:1-16" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 95.

⁵ Herzog, 90.

⁶ Herzog, 86.

⁷ Herzog, 92.

⁸ Herzog, 85.

⁹ Herzog, 91.

worth roughly a subsistence meal for one person. Slaves are treated better than that and this is a slave owning society. The one thing these men have left is their animal energy, and he is humiliating them in front of their peers by saying it's worth so little that twelve times more or less is basically the same thing to him.¹⁰

Jesus has set up this story so that the men who are listening recognize the soul destroying situation they live in.¹¹ With one difference. The owner, who is usually absent, who never has to come in contact with the system they have set up of day laborers being paid low wages, of not having reliable work and therefore not having reliable pay, the owner is there.

I recently heard [a great show](#) about a young Vernon Jordan working as an attorney with his mentor Donald L. Hollowell in Jim Crow South in the 1940s and 50s.¹² They would go before white judges and white prosecutors and white juries and defend African Americans ineptly accused of crimes they had not committed or for which the penalties were disproportionately severe. They would often lose, the racism they faced being so rampant. But there was something else that happened in those trials that broke their hearts and mocked what America stood for. By being there, African American men, impeccably dressed, articulate and deeply familiar with the law, they would show an oppressed community that it was possible to challenge the system. The system, which came down on them at every turn, was a human system and could be confronted. If you want to get to the March on Washington, if you want to get to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, if you want to get to the signing of the Civil Rights Act, you have to believe that this system which humiliates you, which denies that even your raw animal labor has value, you have to believe that it can change, that it is a human system, not a law of nature. Not a law of God.

If as a peasant farmer or as a day laborer you can catch a glimpse of the human system that is oppressing you, you can begin to put together a human response to it. At this moment, when the owner needs to go to the market four times in one day to get enough labor, this moment is when you as day laborers have the most power.¹³ If you can stick together, your labor is more valuable than anything else the owner has, because it's what he needs most of all. There may be so many of you that it's holding down wages, but there are all the more of you who can band together and change this human system.

That is why I see this parable as a stewardship story. If you see it as a grace not works story, then by all means, put your resources towards allowing others to catch a glimpse of God's grace. If you see it as a human systems story, first realize that your resources may be supporting a system that is oppressing others. Then realize that through the work of the church, you can help others join together to challenge what is oppressing them: drugs and alcohol at His Mansion, escape from abusive partners at Bridges, homelessness at the Nashua Soup Kitchen. For whatever reason, fill out your pledge cards, but unlike giving to any or all of our partner organizations individually, you are supporting them and you are banding together. You have found a place in the world that reminds you that we have been freely given grace by God and it has allowed us to stand up to the systems which surround us that humiliate and belittle others. We are stewards not only of the resources God has graced us with, but with the human systems

¹⁰ Herzog, 91.

¹¹ Herzog, 95

¹² Malcolm Gladwell, "[State v. Johnson](#)" and "[Mr. Hollowell Didn't Like That](#)", Podcast episodes 7 and 8 of Season 2 of *Revisionist History*, 2017. Accessed 26 August 2017: <http://revisionisthistory.com/seasons>

¹³ Herzog, 95.

we're a part of. As we fill out our pledge cards, we are pledging to be a part of something strong because it is together. Whether we are catching a glimpse of God's great graciousness in this parable or a glimpse of what a deeply human response could be to a dehumanizing system, we are pledging together to find justice in the vineyard.