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Uncovering the Goodness of God through the Parable of the Vineyard Workers

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The parables attributed to Jesus in the New Testament have been used as a guide for Christians and lay believers for centuries, based on the depictions presented by the Synoptic Gospel writers, Mark, Matthew, and Luke. What was undoubtedly passed on at first as oral tradition became biblical canon from as early as 66ce.^[1] It is important to understand, however, that the first writings of Jesus and his ministry took place decades after his crucifixion and following the passing of many of the apostles who knew Jesus firsthand. It is because of the very nature of this situation, along with the fact that Jesus' own public ministry only lasted for a few years, that a myriad of interpretations of the parables have ensued amongst biblical scholars. Nonetheless, of the parables, there is a consensus that this version of storytelling had an effect on the people of Jesus' time, and Jesus used these stories to convey deep truths about God and of the Kingdom.

In this paper, I would like to probe deeply into the Parable of the Vineyard Workers and demonstrate my understanding of that parable in terms of God's goodness. I will present alternative views on this parable that some scholars have taken, along with my own original preconceptions of this parable as compared to the interpretation I feel fits best for me now. This is to demonstrate, looking simply at this parable, how varied the ideas and opinions are on the meanings and intentions behind the parables altogether.

Basic Storyline of the Parable of the Vineyard Workers

In the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, set in Matthew 20:1-16, a landowner goes out at dawn to recruit some day laborers for his vineyard. He works out an agreement to pay them one denarius for their labors. After a little while, the landowner goes out again to seek out additional workers, and begins a trend of seeking them multiple times throughout the day. In the third hour, some workers are enlisted to help, with the promise that they will receive *what is right* by the landowner. After the landowner goes out a couple more times, he asks one worker why he is standing idle on the street, to which the worker replies that he is waiting to be called to work. Even though by this point it is the eleventh hour (of the traditional twelve-hour working day) the landowner brings these workers to his vineyard, and this time there is no mention of any pay.

At the conclusion of the day, the landowner asks his steward to pay the workers, oddly enough, beginning with the ones who came in the latest part of the day and concluding with the first workers. The landowner watches the steward, and the workers, as lo and behold, they are all paid equally one denarius for their efforts. After a short while, one of the earliest day laborers protests, complaining that their labor was unjustly made equal to the latecomers' efforts. (v. 13) In response, the landowner explains that he gave the day workers exactly what they had agreed upon early in the day, and therefore he was not infringing on their agreement. The landowner has the last word when he asks the question to this laborer, "Am I not allowed to choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (v. 15)

I shared this story with my kids recently while driving home one day. They were quarreling about my daughter, who received two Tic-tacs, whereas my sons only received one piece of gum. I shared this parable to demonstrate the saying, 'fair is not always equal, but in the end, all will get their reward.' I've tried to see if there is an author to this saying or a timestamp on when it became popular, but have been unable to pinpoint any specifics.

Nonetheless, this saying was often used as a prelude, or as Hedrick would call it, *promythium*,^[2] to the Parable of the Vineyard Workers as I heard it growing up. In other words, for me it was a lesson in not being greedy, comparing oneself, or complaining about what one has or doesn't have, or what merits one may or may not earn through one's work, but rather to recognize that in the end, God is a fair God who will give us our reward in heaven.

After presenting this parable in our summer intensive Parables of Jesus class at Unification Theological Seminary however, I realized there was a bit more for me to learn from this parable, and that for me, it was a more profound look at the goodness and generosity of God.

The Impact of the Parable of the Vineyard Workers in Jesus' day

When Jesus told this parable, as is true to the nature of all parables, it related very easily to the everyday agrarian lifestyle of the Jewish people at that time. But also true to the effect and nature of parables in general, this parable in particular, that it had a shocking effect on the listener because of how the story ended.^[3] I am sure most people listening to Jesus' Parable of the Vineyard Workers would have undoubtedly sided with the complaints of the earliest day workers. After all, they worked the longest in the "scorching heat" (v. 12), and yet their reward was the same as those who came and only worked for a mere hour. It is understandable to anyone why the day workers would have felt cheated, and that for real justice to be done, they should have been paid proportionately more for their efforts. The listener of Jesus' parable, therefore, would have had to make his/her own decision about the response of the landowner: do you continue to feel cheated like the day workers, or do you acknowledge that the landowner was true to his word and only demonstrating his right to give equal pay to those who worked less?

In the telling of this parable, Jesus included some key elements to help bring the listener to such a point of decision, as outlined above. For instance, it is a key aspect of the story that the order of payment was reversed, and those who worked the shortest time were paid first, so that those who worked the longest could see and compare their payment with those who came later. It is also a significant detail that the landowner stuck around and observed the workers receive their payment- a custom which would have been odd in those days, given the fact that the landowner was wealthy enough to hire a steward to deal with that kind of thing.^[4] Because the landowner was present to witness the grumbings of the day workers, he could respond to them directly. Finally, we are also poised with the question given by the landowner in response to the day workers' complaints: Why do you begrudge my generosity?

Who was Jesus speaking to in telling the Parable of the Vineyard Workers? In reading the preceding chapter in Matthew, we can see that Jesus was directly responding to Peter's question of his status in the afterlife given his devotion and discipleship to Jesus. Looking more closely however, we can also see that Jesus undoubtedly shared this parable for the Scribes and Pharisees who questioned his ministry, particularly his involvement with "sinners."^[5] In this case, the longest day workers could be likened to the Scribes and Pharisees who were experts in

Jewish law and held them naturally in high esteem in relation to God. The workers who came on the eleventh hour, would have been likened to Gentiles and sinners. Thus, this parable would have undoubtedly been quite shocking for the leadership of the day.

This parable is not the only one in which Jesus utilized an elder or longstanding figure in the story to represent the Jewish leadership. The longest day workers in this parable, and their interaction with the landowner, reminds us of the elder son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), who disapprovingly complains to his father for hosting an extravagant feast upon his younger brother's return. The bitterness and desire to see justice on the part of the central figure, namely the father, is shared by the longest day workers in the Parable of the Vineyard Workers.

What was the purpose by which Jesus inserted these resentful and questioning figures into both parables? If both are likened to the Jewish leadership of Jesus' day, then it is clear that Jesus was challenging them to look beyond their own notions of righteousness and justice. I will go further into this idea a little later in this paper.

Delving More Deeply into the Vineyard Workers

There are additional aspects of the parable that can be analyzed as well. For instance, is it somewhat notable that the landowner is very clear about the wages he proposes to the workers at the beginning of the day, but then becomes increasingly vague and noncommittal, as we see with the workers who come at the eleventh hour. For at least one scholar, the meaning of this variation in monetary commitment to the workers can be seen as a measure of the faith or trust in the landowner on the part of the workers. The idea is that those who came at the end of the day demonstrated more loyalty to the landowner than those who began work early under a specific condition or premise of one denarius for their labors.^[6]

From my personal reading of the story, I also question, between those working in the vineyard and those standing idle waiting for work, who had the more difficult time? Even though the vineyard workers complained of being in the hot sun all day, at least they were given the opportunity to work to make money for their families. I am sure that for such individuals whose livelihood depended on whether they could work or not – as they were not slaves^[7] – those standing idle in the hot sun would have been even more miserable than those who were given work. It is possible that in those days farmers often became jobless on account of Romans confiscating their land over tax issues.^[8] If this was the case, those standing idle all day truly needed to work to survive. I am sure they would have taken on work for any kind of pay, so long as they had an opportunity to do so.

It is also interesting to consider why the landowner needed to go out multiple times during the day to gather more workers for his vineyard. Was he simply foolish (or too wealthy) to realize early in the day how much help he needed?^[9] Is this a metaphor for God and His desperate desire to seek those prepared to help build the Kingdom? These are all interesting approaches to deepening our understanding of Jesus' possible intentions behind the telling of such a story.

In their exegesis of the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, scholars have taken a deeper look at the hidden meanings of the story by looking at the historical context and evaluating how aspects of the story would have been received by the listener at the time it was given.

For Eta Linnemann and others, this parable touches upon the idea of justice, and how our own ideas of justice may be trumped by the generosity and goodness of God. According to Linnemann, there are two injustices the day laborers protest about, the first being that they had to work longer than others for the same pay, and the second being that they had to toil in the scorching heat while the last enjoyed working in the cool of the evening. The landowner addresses both concerns by first reiterating that they received the pay they had both agreed upon, and second, that the owner has the right to share his wealth in the way he chooses. The grumblings of the day workers and the response of the landowner provide the environment for the listener to have an epiphany moment in stumbling upon the "appearance of goodness." By the end of the parable the listener is forced to contend with the fact that "goodness demands approval," and "one cannot grumble against goodness!"^[10]

As mentioned earlier, Jesus likely shared this parable for the Pharisees and Scribes who looked at interactions with the sinful, namely his eating together with prostitutes and tax collectors, as a dangerous game of meddling with the social order of society. There was a fear there, given the fact that Jesus appeared sinless (as one who knew the scriptures) and yet sat and ate together with sinners. For the Jewish leadership of that time, the belief was that Jesus' actions could very well breach "the dam which is to protect society against the overflowing of sin."^[11] Eamonn Bredin reinforces this point by cluing us to the fatalistic mindset of the leaders of that age, who believed that the poor – prostitutes, the lame and tax collectors – were that way as a result of their sinfulness.^[12]

This parable, along with others, has sparked a movement to highlight Jesus' desire to support the lost and those who suffer. They have determined that such parables were Jesus' way of eliciting the need for social reform and social justice. Such parables contributed to the movement known as the Social Gospel in the latter half of the 19th century, which resulted in coordinated efforts to bring about more equity for the 'have nots' in society. This type of interpretation of the Parable of the Vineyard Workers as an example for the cause of social justice has also been utilized to reinforce the idea that Jesus sought to elicit a response from the peasantry to the exploitations of the ruling class, or what William Herzog II calls codifying, or making visible, to peasants their own oppression.^[13] In other words, Jesus was a revolutionary who sought to shake up the status quo, giving cause to his eventual trial and crucifixion by the Roman leadership. It is notable to attribute this call for justice with the foundations of liberation theology and the eventual civil rights movement.

Herzog's interpretation of Jesus a revolutionary figure necessarily abandons any notion of goodness in the landowner in the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, and hence it would certainly be a gross error to equate him to someone like God. For Herzog, the landowner's actions are seen as cruel and manipulating. For example, the fact that he stood and watched the workers get paid, waiting for a confrontation in order to exert his power over the workers, or how he addressed the worker as 'friend,' which he argues was a demeaning term for someone in the position of the landowner, were among the ways that Jesus may have opened the eyes of the underprivileged whom he served.^[14]

It also goes without saying that scholars like Herzog, who see Jesus' parables in light of highlighting social ills and seeking to stimulate revolution, have also read Jesus' other parables in this way, as demonstrating what *not* to do or how *not* to behave. For example, looking again at the Parable of the Prodigal Son, some scholars have made the case that this is an example of a dysfunctional family.^[15] The main perpetrator in the story is the father, who acts foolishly, beginning with allowing his younger son his share of the inheritance before the father has passed on. The parable ends with the elder son frustrated and angry with the father for lavishly welcoming his younger brother, which is used to reinforce the idea that the father has no idea how to care for either of his sons. From this interpretation of the parable, there is no way the father could be likened to God, based on his foolishness.

Moving along to another aspect of the Vineyard Workers parable, there is an additional line at the end, which many scholars have dismissed to be mainly a personal insert by Matthew. Matthew 20:16 concludes the parable with the epimythium, or concluding gnomic sentence, "and the last will be first, and the first last." I have come to agree with Linnemann, having my own epiphany experience rereading this parable and contemplating the goodness of God, that rather than seeing this as a line of judgment – which I personally believed in the past – it is more of a statement showing that in God's grace, all are equal. When understood in this light, the gravity of my personal limitations in how I believed fairness and justice ought to exist in the world comes to light, and I am humbled to adopt a broader paradigm rooted in God's goodness.

Dan Otto Via Jr. continues this idea of God's goodness overcoming our human calculations about justice when he states, as paraphrased by

Hedrick, “our very existence depends on whether we will accept God’s gracious dealings, which shatter our calculations about how things ought to be ordered in the world.”^[16]

For John Crossan, his understanding varies slightly in that he does not give a lot of credence to the final question presented by the landowner in Matthew 20:15, arguing that it was an insertion on the part of Matthew, along with verse 16. Nevertheless, the Parable of the Vineyard Workers is a great example of what Crossan calls both an action parable and a servant parable, which highlights what he refers to as “the temporality of the Kingdom” through the modes of advent, reversal and action. The take away for the listener, therefore, is to be as vigilant as possible and keen to observe God’s timing in our lives: “Like a wise and prudent servant calculating what he must do in the critical reckoning to which his master summons him, one must be ready and willing to respond in life and action to the eschatological advent of God.” For Crossan, however, the punchline is that unfortunately for us, “the eschatological advent of God will always be precisely that for which wise and prudent readiness is impossible because it shatters also our wisdom and our prudence.”^[17] This is the kind of parable we are asked to reckon with.

For me, as I mentioned above, Matthew 20:16 has often been cited as a statement of judgment for the people of God. Why has this been the case? Well, as a young Unificationist living in a Christian nation like the United States, one that is believed according to our faith to have been prepared by God as the second Israel, I was taught that we have a certain providential responsibility in front of us as the “elder son nation” to be an example to other nations of the world. Therefore, the statement “the first shall be last, and the last first” can be seen as very alarming, in the sense that other nations or peoples might end up having more fervor in building the Kingdom, and therefore receive more blessings, than America, which might lose her blessing and position due to her ignorance. In other words, this statement is used many times by Unificationists as a warning to “maintain our position,” with shame and failure attached to “coming in second.”

According to Linnemann’s interpretation however, I am reminded that the statement can be seen more in light of the idea that, no matter the order, all will receive what is owed to us through the grace of God. This shift in perspective is a freeing one for me as a Unificationist, and I believe, can help Unificationists as a collective whole to stand more in a true position to be Christ-like, serving others and allowing others to go before us to the Kingdom. And as I reflect on it further, frankly, this is how Father and Mother Moon, our founders, have always emphasized the role of Unificationists in regards to our service and impact on the world. Perhaps the current concept of competition and struggle to maintain one’s position, as I feel from the Unification Church leaders, is actually more of a patriarchal construct, or even a servant-mentality, and less true to how we ought to be seeing ourselves in an age of being sons and daughters to God as our Heavenly Parent.

A God of Goodness

Is God a fool, like the father who is portrayed in the Prodigal story? Is God rather a landowner relating to us as day workers? How much do we truly understand the nature of God? Surely Christianity offers a unique perspective of God because Jesus called God, *Abba*, or Father, and throughout the Old Testament scriptures we can see many examples of God’s unfailing commitment to His-Her people. The book of Psalms offers many examples of God’s goodness, steadfastness, and constant devotion.^[18] Of course, as we have seen, Jesus’ parables also offer great insight into the nature of God and what it means to be living in the Kingdom of Heaven. From my Parables class, I learned the variety of Jesus’ parables, which can be broadly defined as parables of grace, judgment, and those pertaining to the Kingdom. I learned that many of these parables can overlap in category.

In my exploration of the Parable of the Vineyard Workers in particular, it occurs to me that a case could be made that the so-called parables of judgment can still highlight God’s grace and goodness. Perhaps such parables demonstrate how God, as a loving parent, needs to set clear guidelines for our growth and maturity, and outline for us the consequences of recklessness. I believe also that just as the Old Testament brought certain rules and understanding of God’s truth for God’s people of that time, Jesus also offered humanity a new way of seeing God’s truth in order for us to deepen our understanding and relationship with Him-Her. I also believe that the advent of Jesus brought with it strict forms of judgment, simply because humanity was dealing with the very real works and accusations of Satan towards humanity. Therefore, Jesus had to be quite strict in telling us how to separate ourselves from evil and truly “be born anew” (John 3:3-4) so that we may engraft ourselves to God’s side.

Perhaps this is why the people of Jesus’ day were often presented truths through parables: in order to present them with a decision to which they had to respond, which often required them to change their limited beliefs and ideas to accommodate a deeper way of thinking and being. Thus, it is my belief that with the higher truth brought by Jesus to illuminate the reality of God and His-Her Kingdom, judgment was required as a necessary counterpart, especially to God’s people based on the truth they received and what they would do with it as a result. I believe this is why Jesus seemed to condemn and criticize the Jewish leadership in his day the most: not simply to judge them but to implore them to respond to God at the appropriate hour based on their faithfulness to the laws and practices of the chosen people which they were already privy to.

Conclusion

In this paper, my intention was both to make a case for the goodness of God, that we must see justice and righteousness from God’s viewpoint, as well as to share my personal realization of this point through the Parable of the Vineyard Workers. As I have presented, we can find a range of interpretations of the parables that illuminate the hidden meanings and intentions behind them and elucidate why Jesus used them in his ministry. Undoubtedly, they left a mark on the people of his day, which would reverberate for millennia, inspiring Christians and lay believers alike. My intention in sharing my own paradigm shift in regards to the final verse of the parable in Matthew was also to demonstrate how there is love and goodness even behind what appears to be God’s judgment. For this listener of the Parable of the Vineyard Workers, I am making the decision to accept the goodness and generosity of God for me, to not complain of my portion, and to seek to demonstrate the same goodness and heavenly justice to those around me.

Notes

[1] “Gospel of Mark,” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, June 27, 2022).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Mark#Mark_and_the_New_Testament

[2] Hedrick, Charles W, *Many Things in Parables: Jesus and His Modern Critics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19.

[3] Getty-Sullivan, Mary Ann, *Parables of the Kingdom: Jesus and the Use of Parables in the Synoptic Tradition* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

[4] Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables*, 74- 75.

[5] Long, Phillip J, “Reading Acts” Weblog post.

[6] Linnemann, Eta, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (London: S.P.C.K., 1966), 83.

[7] Long, “Reading Acts.”

[8] “The Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16),” Theology of Work Project, Accessed June 25, 2022,

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/matthew/living-in-the-new-kingdom-matthew-18-25/the-laborers-in-the-vineyard-matthew-201-16>.

- [9] Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables*, 74.
- [10] Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 84.
- [11] Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 86.
- [12] Bredin, Eamonn, "The Good News for the Poor," *The Furrow* 40, No. 1 (Jan. 1989): 25-31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27661442>
- [13] Hedrick, *Many Things in Parables*, 74.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 74-75.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 39-42.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 81.
- [17] Crossan, John Dominic, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992), 116
- [18] Stilley, Loyd, "Sermon: The Goodness of God - Psalm 145, 107," (Lifeway Christian Resources, January 1, 2014). <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-god-goodness-psalm-145-107>.

Prev

Next

