

Matthew: 20:1–16

From Catena Aurea:

1. For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an housholder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.
2. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.
3. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market-place,
4. And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way.
5. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise.
6. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle?
7. They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.
8. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.
9. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny.
10. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny.
11. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house,
12. Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day.
13. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny?

14. Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.

15. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

16. So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

ORIGEN. For the whole of this present life may be called one day, long to us, short compared to the existence of God.

ORIGEN. The denarius I suppose here to mean salvation.

ORIGEN. The market-place is all that is without the vineyard, that is, without the Church of Christ.

ORIGEN. Or, He did not call upon the labourers of the third hour for a complete task, but left to their own choice, how much they should work. For they might perform in the vineyard work equal to that of those who had wrought since the morning, if they chose to put forth upon their task an operative energy, such as had not yet been exerted.

HILARY. These then are sent into the vineyard, Go ye also into my vineyard.

ORIGEN. Or; The Lord said to his steward, that is, to one of the Angels who was set over the payment of the labourers; or to one of those many guardians, according to what is written, that The heir as long as he is a child is under tutors and governors. (Gal. 4:2.)

ORIGEN. But the first labourers having the witness through faith have not received the promise of God, the lord of the household providing some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. (Heb. 11:40.) And because we have obtained mercy, we hope to receive the reward first, we, that is, who are Christ's, and after us they that wrought before us; wherefore it is said, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first.

AUGUSTINE. (de Spir. et Lit. 24.) Or; The lesser are therefore taken as first, because the lesser are to be made rich.

CHRYSOSTOM. But we ought not to pursue through every particular the circumstances of a parable, but enter into its general scope, and seek nothing further. This then is not introduced in order to represent some as moved with envy, but to exhibit the honour that shall be given us as so great as that it might stir the jealousy of others.

JEROME. Or, all that were called of old envy the Gentiles, and are pained at the grace of the Gospel.

HILARY. And this murmur of the labourers corresponds with the frowardness of this nation, which even in the time of Moses were stiff-necked.

JEROME. A denarius bears the figure of the king. You have therefore received the reward which I promised you, that is, my image and likeness; what desirest thou more? And yet it is not that thou shouldest have more, but that another should have less that thou seekest. Take that is thine, and go thy way.

ORIGEN. Perhaps it is to Adam He says, Friend, I do thee no wrong; didst thou not agree with me for a denarius? Take that thine is, and go thy way. Salvation is thine, that is, the denarius. I will give unto this last also as unto thee. A person might not improbably suppose, that this last was the Apostle Paul, who wrought but one hour, and was made equal with all who had been before him.

AUGUSTINE. (de Sanc. Virg. 26.) Because that life eternal shall be equal to all the saints, a denarius is given to all; but forasmuch as in that life eternal the light of merits shall shine diversely, there are with the Father many mansions; so that under this same denarius bestowed unequally one shall not live longer than another, but in the many mansions one shall shine with more splendour than another.

CHRYSOSTOM. That He called not all of them at once, but some in the morning, some at the third hour, and so forth, proceeded from the difference of their minds¹. He then called them when they would obey; as He also called the thief when he would obey. Whereas they say, Because no man hath hired us, we ought not to force a sense out of every particular in a parable. Further, it is the labourers and not the Lord who speak thus; for that He, as far as it pertains to Him, calls all men from their earliest years, is shewn in this, He went out early in the morning to hire labourers.

ORIGEN. But this, Why stand ye here all the day idle? is not said to such as having begun in the spirit (Gal. 3:3) have been made perfect by the flesh, as inviting them to return again, and to live in the Spirit. This we speak not to dissuade prodigal sons, who have consumed their substance of evangelic doctrine in riotous living, from returning to their father's house; but because they are not like those who sinned in their youth, before they had learnt the things of the faith.

CHRYSOSTOM. When He says, The first shall be last, and the last first, He alludes secretly to such as were at the first eminent, and afterwards set at nought virtue; and to others who have been reclaimed from wickedness, and have surpassed many. So that this parable was made to quicken the zeal of those who are converted in extreme old age, that they should not suppose that they shall have less than others.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

20:1 A Householder Hires Laborers

20:2 Negotiating a Wage

The Vineyard and the Workers.

Chrysostom: What then does the parable mean? For it is necessary first to make this clear; then we will unravel the other point. By the vineyard he means the commandments of God, and the time of working refers to the present life. The workers—those called to the task at different times: early, at the third hour, at the sixth, at the ninth, at the eleventh—are those who have come forward at different ages and lived justly. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 64.3.

A Denarius a Day.

Cyril of Alexandria: He gives to all “their single denarius,” which is the grace of the Spirit, perfecting the saints in conformity with God and impressing the heavenly stamp on their souls and leading them to life and immortality. Fragment 226.

20:3–5 Hiring at Different Times of the Day

The Day as the History of Revelation.

Cyril of Alexandria: Avoiding ambition, the Lord speaks about another householder, being himself the householder and the regulator of the kingdom of heaven. By “day” he means the whole age during which at different moments since the transgression of Adam he calls just individuals to their pious work, defining rewards for them for their actions. And so “around the first hour” are those at the time of Adam and Enoch; “at the third hour” those in the time of Noah and Shem and the righteous descending from them, for the second time is also the second calling, when the laws were also different. The workers called “at the sixth hour” are those in the time of Abraham, the time of the institution of the circumcision; those “at the eleventh hour” are those just before Christ’s advent. In their time alone the question is asked, “What are you doing standing the whole day idle?” for they do not have the hope of the Lord. They were godless in the world and idle in every good work; they are like those “standing idle in the market place,” not groping in search of anything at all but running through their whole life to no purpose. The Lord admonishes them, “Why do you stand idle?” They answer, “No one has hired us; for neither Moses nor

any of the holy men spoke to the Gentiles but to Jerusalem alone.” Nevertheless the lord sends them too into the vineyard. There are five callings so that he may show that at each time there were sensible people and aimless ones, like the five wise virgins and the five foolish ones, according to their particular times. Some were found worthy, and some in their folly thought little of the coming age. At the end of life, which is evening (for the time after Christ’s sojourn until the consummation is the time after the eleventh hour, as John says: “It is the last hour”), the householder orders their wages to be given, beginning with the last. The householder should be considered the Father using the Son as manager, not as a subsidiary but as colleague; for he orders and regulates everything through him, whatever he wishes. Fragment 226.

20:6 Why Do You Stand Idle?

20:7–8 Paying All the Laborers

Beginning with the Last.

Cyril of Alexandria: The last ones, receiving the generosity of the Master instead of troubles, are first to receive their reward, since all those after the Lord’s coming have become—through baptism and the union with the Spirit—“sharers in God’s nature” and are called sons of God.... For the prophets too have become sharers in the Spirit, but not in the same way as the faithful, since the Holy Spirit is in some way like a leaven for the souls of the faithful and changes the entire man to another condition of life. And so we have become “participants in God’s nature,” and openly we cry “Abba, Father.” The more ancient peoples did not receive the same grace. So Paul too says, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.” The ancients then received a spirit of slavery without the honor of adoption. Since therefore we really are first to receive a denarius, we must of necessity be said to be honored above the rest. Fragment 226.

20:9 Each Received a Denarius

Ready to Obey.

Chrysostom: So what was the point of this parable and what does it want to accomplish? To make those who convert in their extreme old age more earnest and to make them better and not to let them think they have less. He introduces others who are angry over the rewards of these elders, not so as to show them pining or eaten with envy—far from it—but to show that the elders enjoy such great honor as even

to cause envy in others. This we too often do when we say, “The fellow criticized me because I thought you worthy of such great honor,” when we have not been criticized and do not really wish to abuse him but just to show him how large a gift the other enjoyed. But why did he not hire them all at once? As far as concerned him, he did hire all. But if all did not listen at the same time, the time difference was caused by the inclinations of those called. And so some are called early, some at the third hour, some at the sixth, some at the ninth hour and some at the eleventh when they were about to obey. Paul also makes this same point when he says, “When it pleased him, separating me from my mother’s womb.” When did it please him? When Paul was ready to obey. For God wished it even from the beginning, but Paul would not yield; then it pleased him when he too was ready to obey. In this way too Christ called the thief, though he was able to call him even earlier, but he would not have obeyed. For if Paul at the beginning would not obey, how much less would the thief have obeyed. Some may say, “No one hired us.” As I said, we should not busy ourselves too much about every detail in the parables. But here it is not the master of the house who said this but those workers; he does not contradict them, not so as to perplex them but to draw them to him. For that he called all—as far as concerned him—to him from the first, even the parable shows when it says that “he went out early in the morning to hire.” The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 64.3.

20:10 Each Received the Same

They Thought They Would Receive More.

Cyril of Alexandria: Among these [workers] the first seem to have toiled more than the last as having been subject longer to the devil’s fanaticism—sin and death and corruption not yet being overpowered. If examined on an equal basis, the matter supposes that more is owed to the earlier workers, because they lived their life when death and the devil ruled; for this is “the burden of the day and the scorching heat,” when not even the dew of the Spirit was present to help men to righteousness. Fragment 226.

20:11 They Grumbled at the Householder

20:12 The Burden of the Day

You Have Made Them Equal with Us.

Chrysostom: What does this parable wish us to understand? For what is said at the beginning does not agree with what is said at the end but appears totally at odds. For in the first part he shows all enjoying the same rewards and not some being thrown out and some being brought in. And yet he himself, both

before the parable and after the parable, said the opposite, that “the first will be last and the last first,” that is, first before the original first; [those who worked all day] do not stay first but become last. To show what this means, Jesus adds, “For many are called, but few are chosen”; so in a double way he criticizes one group and encourages and consoles the other. The parable does not say this, but it says that they will be equal with the just and those who have toiled much. “You have made them equal to us,” it says, “who have carried the burden and the heat of the day.” The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 64.3.

20:13 You Agreed for a Denarius

I Am Doing You No Wrong.

Chrysostom: But the question is whether the first ones, who were righteous and pleased God and who shone brightly from their labors through the whole day, at the end are possessed by the lowest vice, envy and jealousy. For they saw the others enjoying the same rewards and said, “These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the weight and the heat of the day.” Even though they were not going to be penalized or to suffer any loss of their own pay, with these words they were angry and displeased at the blessing others received. That was proof of envy and jealousy. And what is more, the master of the house, in justifying and defending himself to the speaker, convicts him of wickedness and the lowest envy, saying, “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. Is your eye wicked because I am good?” The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 64.3.

20:14 I Choose to Give

The Point of the Parable.

Chrysostom: What then is to be understood from these words? From other parables also it is possible to see the same point. The son who was righteous is shown to have suffered from this same fault when he saw his prodigal brother enjoying great honor, even more than himself. So just as the one group received greater reward in being the first to receive it, so the other group was more highly honored by the abundance of the gifts; and to these that righteous son bears witness.

What then can we say? In the kingdom of heaven there is no one who justifies himself or blames others in this way; perish the thought! That place is pure and free from envy and jealousy. For if the saints when they are here give their lives for sinners, how much more do they rejoice when they see them there

enjoying rewards and consider their blessings to be their own. For what reason then did he use this figure of speech? A parable is being told, and it is not necessary to examine everything in a parable to the letter. But when we have learned the point of the parable as composed, we should reap this harvest and not be overly particular about further details. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 64.3.

20:15 Do You Begrudge My Generosity?

20:16 The First Last