

Labor Day - Workers and Talents

September 1, 2024

This is Labor Day weekend. Labor Day is not exactly the most exciting holiday on the calendar. It's best known, perhaps, as a last long weekend before the demands of the school year get serious, and other activities that make the final few months of the year a busy time.

I thought today we'd look at some of what Jesus had to say about labor. There's a lot in the gospels. Maybe best known is, from Matthew 11:28,

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

What I will do is explore two parables of Jesus concerning labor in Matthew. They may seem to be a bit contradictory. First is the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, Matthew Chapter 20. Jesus is speaking.

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius^[a] a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; ⁴ and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. ⁵ Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶ And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸ And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹ And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, ¹² saying, ‘These 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.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’^[b]

In our world, this kind of employment, daily workers hired off the street, still happens, but not as much as in the past. Some relatives of mine ran a small corner restaurant in St. Louis, in the warehouse district. Day workers would hang around at the street corners in the morning, hoping a truck driver would hire them to load or unload trucks. There was no promise of employment. If you failed to get hired too many times, you'd end up in trouble. I myself had a small brush with that when I was in high school. I delivered newspapers, which a truck would drop off at the shopping center. If the truck was late, I'd wait in front of the A&P grocery store. On several occasions a truck driver needing to unload boxes there would pay me maybe fifty cents to help with the unloading. I lived at home. But for someone making a living that way, more so if feeding a family, it would be life on the edge.

The "householder" was the owner of a vineyard. At a certain time of year, around September in Palestine, it was important to get the harvest of grapes in before the rains fell, and ruined what was left in the field. He was desperate to get all the laborers he could. Several times he went back to the marketplace, where men would gather when looking for work. To those contracted first, the agreed wage was a denarius for the day's work. A denarius is a small silver coin that corresponds very closely to the Greek drachma. A half drachma is the same size as a dime. One drachma, or denarius, of silver back then, was slightly smaller than a quarter. That one such silver coin was a day's pay for a mercenary. In this parable, also the pay for a manual laborer. Likely a fairly generous wage.

So, what happens? The Householder pays everybody a denarius, those who worked only one hour, as well as those who had labored for a 12 hour day. Was that fair? According to Jewish traditions of the that day, pay should be proportional to the amount of work done. Isn't that pretty much our expectation today? Don't people get outraged when someone seems to be paid less than another for the same amount of work? I'm sure you can think of examples. People protest that it isn't fair, and, ask for fixes, to make it equal pay for equal work.

Yet, Jesus is telling his listeners, this, the way the householder manages, is like the Kingdom of Heaven. What God intends. How can that be? The late guys got a pay rate of 12 times that of the early workers. They all walked away with the same pay. Which was enough to feed them and their families. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells us to pray to God for our daily bread. The householder, representing God, has taken care of all those he had employed. Those from first in the morning received what they were due. Those brought in later, with no firm contract except the good will of the householder, received grace. That is Jesus's point. We can depend on the Grace of God, and should not expect more than that for having been,

in our own eyes, more deserving than someone else. Even in the case of what seems inequity. Compared to the grace and mercy of God, at the end, other things don't matter.

Notice how the householder addresses one of those who grumbled. He called him "My friend." He patiently explained his actions in terms that should have made sense. All of the workers, from first to last, were the householders' community.

You may be thinking, well, that's all about manual labor. Hourly guys who punch a time clock. What about white collar types? People on salary. We have a parable applicable to that, too, from Matthew 25.

Matthew 25: ¹⁴“For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents,^[a] to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to every one who has, will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’

The people in this parable were not day laborers. The day laborers were free men. “Independent contractors,” you could say. These three servants here are managers of assets. Yet, technically, “servants” in this context also means “slave.” That word is used in some Bible translations. Their continued life and support did not depend directly on hours worked. You could say they were on salary, in the sense that support from the master was assured as long as he was not displeased.

The word “talent” has, because of this parable, been abstracted to mean the innate capabilities a person is born with, or developed. That’s not what Jesus’s listeners would have heard. A “talent” was a unit of weight, about 80 pounds. In antiquity, it was used for measuring large sums of money in terms of “talents” of gold, silver, or copper. In the Bible, the word most often appears at the national transaction level.

For example, in II Kings 23:33 we read: ³³ **And Pharaoh Neco ... laid upon the land a tribute of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold.** Pharaoh Neco had won the battle and conquered Judea. He was using his power to demand that his installed figurehead king collect and send to him all of that silver and gold.

A talent was about the maximum load you could put on a slave’s back when you were hauling treasure home after looting a foreign palace or temple. Physical, literal “talents” were big slabs of metal cast in sort of a butterfly shape to facilitate being carried as a burden. For silver, a talent eventually came to be defined as 6000 denarii. That’s about 16 years of generous pay to a daily worker, or to a mercenary. If you want to get an equivalent today, a number on the order of a million dollars would seem about right. One talent was a lot of money. Jesus probably did not mean literally 80 pound slabs of silver, but the equivalent in other assets.

The first and second servant doubling their money wouldn’t be surprising if the master was gone several years. If you invest money at 10% annual interest, you double your money in about seven years. In the ancient Roman world, interest rates varied from 3 or 4% up, sometimes reaching quite large numbers like 12% to even 48%. Even a conservative investment strategy would yield a meaningful gain. Burying the physical assets in the ground would yield no gain.

Unlike the earlier parable of the workers in the vineyard, all three servants don’t get the same thing! Two are rewarded. The master says, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.” The third servant, who had conserved the talent, but no more, was punished. To hearers in Jesus’s day, this parable, like that of the vineyard, seemed unfair. Burying money was seen as a “safe” resort. If you were given something to keep, buried it, and later returned it to the owner, that was seen as an effort that would conserve the asset, and not deserving of punishment.

So, is this an inconsistency? The workers in the vineyard all received a daily equal amount, by the grace of the householder. There's no indication of lack of effort; some just worked for a shorter time because they didn't get hired until later. In the talents parable two of the servants are well rewarded, but the third one is cast out. That's not equal treatment.

Parables are meant to teach, to convey a truth. These parables are about the Kingdom of Heaven, of God. In the truth Jesus is illustrating, it isn't the outcome that the master is condemning for this third servant. "**You wicked and slothful servant,**" the master says. This servant is being punished for both lack of effort, slothfulness, and for blaming his failure to work for his master's interests on the master's faults. That's seen as "wicked." The third servant blames his master's specific evil behavior, for which he cites two examples, for his fear. He then takes refuge in claiming to have done all that he was required to do: that is, nothing. This is the equivalent of calling God evil, and using that to justify doing nothing, but also not doing any harm. Can one behave that way and then expect grace?

Jesus is telling us that God expects more of us than just conserving assets. He cares what we do with that with that with which we have been entrusted. He isn't following the modern management practice of trying to assess "outcomes." He has given his assets to the three servants in accordance with their abilities. The third servant defaulted, and then sought to fix blame for his failure on the master.

God expects us to behave like we are in the Kingdom of Heaven. Which, we are, in terms of our trust in God, and living by the grace granted to us through Jesus. To the extent that our labors can make this world more like what God intends, well that's our task. He has given us each assets to manage. We've come to understand that it's more than just money. The time clock issues or asset portfolio of other people is God's business, not ours. We are not appointed to be each others' judge. For us, God's grace is sufficient. All of those assets and works will be left behind as we stand before the King, and plead that Jesus has given his life for us, and that we are his.

Even so the thief on the cross, who met Jesus in the last hour of his days on Earth. He had no portfolio of outcomes, and very likely no history of gainful employment. But his act of giving witness in faith is still remembered, and has been passed down in the Bible since. Reading from Luke 23:

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into^[d] your kingdom.” ⁴³ And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

God, through Jesus, gave him what he needed. We can live in the hope that our labors are not in vain. Work faithfully. But our trust is in Jesus, and God’s promises.

Amen.