

20:1 *For*- The context is the end of chapter 19, about the first now being last in the eternal order of things to be established at Christ's return. The parable is therefore about the situation amongst believers in Christ. At 19:1 I presented a chiasmus plan, showing that this parable is to be read in the context of chapters 18 and 19 with their theme of the need to accept and not reject our brethren. That theme is to be found at the very end of the parable- insofar as the harder workers are inclined to reject their brethren who have not worked so long nor so hard. Many of the parables contain their essential point right at the end, and this parable does likewise. The end stress is upon the need for the harder working brethren to accept their weaker brethren, standing as they all do before the judgment presence of the Lord Jesus. The teaching that "the last shall be first" concluded chapter 19 and it concludes this parable (20:16). I suggested under 19:30 that the point of this is that the first in a secular sense *within the community of believers* will be saved only by grace and will be "the last" in the Kingdom. The phrase therefore talks of salvation by grace, and this is the theme of this parable too.

The context of the parable is Peter's comment: "What shall we have therefore?", implying that the disciples ought to get a far greater reward than the spiritually immature rich people who refused to part with their wealth but could be saved anyway by the Lord's grace. The hard workers are thereby to be equated with the disciples and all who consider themselves spiritually superior to others- they "expected that they should have received more" (20:10 NIV), just as Peter likewise expected more. The parable suggests the Lord wanted to specifically reward the lazy and weaker workers. For they are called first to receive their penny- when surely appropriacy would demand that the harder workers were first in line. And yet the parable had wider relevance to the situation in the first century- and today. The harder workers somehow felt unhappy with the *basis* of contract upon which the lazier workers had been taken on and 'saved' by being given the same penny as they. But the basis of salvation was the same- for the zealous and for the lazy, for Jew and Gentile. And that basis was grace. The weaker workers showed perhaps more faith in the Master's offer- because it would've seemed unreal that they would be given the same pay as the stronger, longer workers. But they believed it- which is why they went to do their little work.

The impression we are left with is that the Lord was and is utterly desperate for workers- He is willing to take on any "little ones" prepared to believe His amazing offer. And the same impression is given in the parable of the street people being urged in to the feast. All they had to do was say yes- there was an urgency to fill the house. And surely we in these last days must perceive ourselves as the 11th hour workers, then ones taken on at the very last minute. That alone adequately explains the mixed bag which comprises the body of Christ in our times, and the weak state of that body.

*The Kingdom... is like unto a man-* The man, the head of the house, is clearly the Lord Jesus. And the Kingdom of God is like... Him. The grace of the Lord Jesus, His manner of being and judging amongst men, is the essence of the Kingdom both now and evermore.

*Householder-* Perhaps we are to connect this parable to the other parable about a *householder* who had a *vineyard* (21:33- the same Greek words are used). Putting the two parables together, God worked so hard to prepare the vineyard so that maximum spiritual fruit would be brought forth. But Israel rejected His prophets and murdered His Son- even though God was confident they would “reverence My Son”, actually they killed Him. The wonderful vineyard was therefore given out to the Gentiles, or at least, to others, whom the owner was likewise confident would tend it and bring forth fruit for Him. But this parable indicates that actually He had a major problem getting them to come work in it- meaning that much potential fruit was lost. And the parable of 21:28 says that the vineyard owner’s very own sons were not much help either- one refused to go, and only later went to the work; the other said he would go and work, but never did. God’s hopefulness for human response, and the tragedy of our paucity of response, is thus brought out yet stronger. It may be objected that the parables appear to be chronologically out of sequence if they are indeed intended to be read together. My response would be that we have in the Gospels a highly abbreviated record of the Lord’s teaching, and likely He repeated His teachings and parables many times over. Perhaps the parable of the vineyard owner was told in full [both parables put together] several times, but we have just parts of the parable recorded on two separate occasions.

*Which went out-* This is emphasized four times (also in :3,5,6). The Greek word is often used about the Lord Jesus ‘going out’ to men with the Gospel; it is the same word in Jn. 8:42 “I *proceeded forth*... from God” and Jn. 13:3 “He was *come from* [‘went out from’] God”. Rather than suggesting any personal pre-existence, this is simply a reference to the Lord *during His ministry* likewise ‘going forth’ to men and women with the Gospel, seeking to engage men in the Father’s service. The call of the Gospel, therefore, is not merely to believe the Gospel- it is a call to action, to harvest fruit, to work in the vineyard.

*Went out early in the morning-* The very same Greek phrase is used about how the Lord “went out early in the morning” to pray about the calling of the disciples (Mk. 1:35). The language is also used about the earliest disciples ‘going out’ from the tomb of the risen Lord, also “early in the morning”, to bring word to others. The message was ultimately not just passing on information, but an invitation to actually work.

*Early-* The Lord Himself was noted for rising up early and praying (Mk. 1:35). The observant Jew prayed three times / day, the first and last prayers being merely the recital of the *shema*. Yet Jesus spent hours in those morning and evening prayers (Mk. 1:35; 6:46). Is. 50:4 prophesies of the Lord Jesus that morning by morning, God awoke His ear "to learn as a disciple". That last phrase is surely to signal the intended similarities between the Lord's path of growth, and that of all disciples. The next two verses go on to predict that because of this morning-by-morning teaching process, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting" (Is. 50:5,6). Thus we come to the cross, the life of cross carrying, as the end result of our morning reflections. It was from His own experience that the Lord could bid us take up our cross- *His* cross- each morning.

Have you ever had to make yourself wake up before dawn, without an alarm clock? You can only do it by having a deep internal, subconscious awareness that you must get up early. You don't sleep well, you keep waking up and wondering if it's time to get up. So to make oneself rise up early was easily understood as a figure expressing great mental effort. And God did this *every day* for centuries... This figure of rising up early is surely the basis for the Lord's parable in Mt. 20:1- where God is likened to a man going out early in the morning to hire labourers. It is through the ministry of His word that God does this- each morning that word calls us to labour for Him in His vineyard. Israel didn't notice the huge effort God puts into His word- that every day He rose early and taught them. We can also misunderstand Biblical inspiration to mean that God effortlessly inspired "the original autographs" long ago, and moved on; but actually the whole process is an ongoing and incredible outgiving of God's energy in appealing to us. And... in our mismanaged, weakly disciplined lives, is it so that we don't even make time to read His word daily? If Job could value God's word *more* than His regular daily food... then for us too, regular contact with His word should be part of the atmosphere of life within which we live.

*To hire-* Rom. 4:4 uses the same word in stressing that salvation is not our "hire" from God, it is the gift of grace. One wonders if Paul is alluding to the parable- to make the point that salvation is a gift, and yet in another sense we each receive a response for our labour. This is in that our labours now will receive eternal recognition in the form in which we will be throughout eternity.

*Labourers-* Literally, 'toilers'. There can be no mistaking the Lord's impression here- response to His invitation is not merely intellectual assent to the truth of Bible teachings, nor is it about painless involvement in the work of His church when, how and how far convenient to us. It's an invitation to toil and really work in His enterprise. The Lord had earlier lamented that the harvest was more plenteous than the few labourers (Mt. 9:37,38). He had asked the disciples to pray for more labourers- and the added detail of this parable is that those labourers were still not enough,

and were weak [nobody had wished to hire them] and didn't in the end do much work. In this we see how the total conversion of others is limited by the preachers; for the Lord surely implies that there are more potential converts than there are preachers to bring them in. This passage paves the way for the giving of the great commission to us all later in Matthew- to work in the vineyard in harvest time, gathering the plentiful harvest. The "Go..." of :4 fulfils the same function. Elsewhere the Lord likens labourers to the preachers. He clearly saw a primary reason for our calling as to preach and help others to the harvest of the Kingdom. He called us in different ways to labour for and with Him in this work; not to merely passively hold various doctrinal truths in intellectual purity, or to dumbly attend church meetings of whatever sort.

20:2 *Agreed with the labourers*- The Greek carries the idea of entering into a contract. We enter covenant relationship with the Father and Son when we are baptized. Again I must labour the point- that this agreement, this entry into Christ and His vineyard, is not merely a sign that we like the social club or that we assent to the teachings of a particular Christian denomination. It is a personal commitment between the individual and their Lord, to work for Him.

There is the suggestion in the parable of the labourers that the Lord makes some big concessions to human weakness. The Spirit in Paul points the contrast between realizing that salvation is by pure grace, and the wrong perception of salvation as a wage paid for works (e.g. Rom. 6). Indeed, the whole spirit of the Bible is that we should be willing to serve for nothing. The parable of the slave preparing his Master's meal after working hard for him a whole day makes this point. And yet in the parable of the labourers, Christ *agrees* with the labourers for a penny (note his humility, cp. God reasoning with men to accept His forgiveness, Is. 1:18); He asks them to go to work, and then He will give them the wages (cp. salvation). He even describes their salvation as "that which is right", so much did He present the Gospel to them from the selfish level they were then on. The Lord was not ignorant of the line of argument Paul would later present regarding salvation by pure grace. Surely the parable is teaching that the Lord recognizes that in our spiritual immaturity at the time of our conversion, we do need the Kingdom as a carrot, as a motivator. He treats us on this low level initially, hoping we will rise up the higher level of grace. It is possible to witness this spiritual growth in converts, and also in the community of true believers over time; initially we are motivated by the reward of the political Kingdom, but as spiritual perception increases, we grasp Paul's gospel of pure grace. The concept of working and being rewarded decreases, and the recognition of salvation by grace increases, with the resultant zeal for a truer spirituality.

*A penny a day*- The implication is that the workers were intended to work for several days. But at the end of the first day comes the scene which is clearly intended to be reminiscent of the last

judgment. The idea may be that the last day comes sooner than expected and is hastened by the Lord of the harvest.

*He sent them-* “Sent” translates *apostello*, meaning that all who go to work for the Lord, including the weak who work only one hour, are in fact apostles. We have a specific sense of mission, a sense of having been given a concrete and actual mission in life. That sense is rarely met in unbelievers, and the senses of mission they may have typically only last for part of their lives and become tinged with disillusion. The mission of harvesting men and women for the Kingdom never becomes like that.

20:3 *Saw-* Here is an insight into how the Lord ‘foresees’ potential workers / believers, but it is over to them if they respond to the call given.

*Standing idle-* The Greek *argos* definitely means ‘lazy’ and isn’t a particularly positive word to use about someone (Some young widows became *argos*, gossiping and interfering where they ought not because they had nothing better to do, 1 Tim. 5:13; Cretans were rumoured to be lazy, *argos*, Tit. 1:12). The word means literally a non-worker. These men hadn’t been hired because they were lazy. The ones the Master was so eager to use were in fact not very good workers, in fact they were non-workers. The hard workers obviously had a problem with the acceptance of these men, and their being treated on the same basis as themselves. This section thus continues the theme begun in chapter 18 and developed throughout this set of material which this parable concludes- see on 19:1. The hard workers equate with the disciples who didn’t want to accept or forgive the “little one”, the man who would not forgive others their inadequacies and ended up condemned, the big debtor who refused to forgive others their minor debt to him. This parable finishes with the harder workers rebuked and possibly even rejected- and these lazier ones accepted. The point is that the harder workers were disciplined / rejected because of their despising of their weaker brethren.

If we insist on reading *argos* as meaning strictly those without work, then another challenging lesson is presented. All human endeavour and achievement is a standing around doing nothing- compared to the ultimate achievement of harvesting for the Lord, of working with the Lord in His work of bringing people to eternity and to ultimate existence.

*In the marketplace-* The Lord's preceding usage of this term had been in the context of the work of preaching. He had spoken of how His disciples were like children in marketplaces appealing to others to respond to His message (11:16). But in this parable, the men in the marketplace were inactive and lazy. And yet at the end of the parable, these are the ones who are more acceptable than those who work harder but reject the lazy workers. The similar usage of "the marketplace" in these two parables suggests that whilst it is the Lord's followers who appeal to other children, their 'fellows' in humanity, it is also the Lord personally who works through them to make the appeal.

20:4 *Go...*- This again paves the way for the "Go..." of the great preaching commission which Matthews's Gospel concludes with.

*Also-* The hint may be that the later workers are working for their Lord on the same basis as the harder and longer workers, even if their achievements and levels of service vastly differ.

*Whatever is right I will give-* "Right" translates *dikaïos*, a word carrying a distinct moral sense and elsewhere translated 'righteousness'. The idea of the gift of righteousness, that which is right, is at the heart of much of Romans (Rom. 5:17 specifically speaks of "the gift of righteousness"). The penny paid for a few hours work speaks of salvation, granted as an undeserved gift, and yet also somehow 'that which is just / right' because of the way we are counted just because we are in Christ. There was no specific promise of a penny, and yet this was judged by the Lord as 'what was right'. Intentionally, the storyline of the parable leads us to cry out that it is *not* just to give labourers the same pay, when some work far longer and harder than others- at least 12 times longer, in some cases. But it *is* just in the new justice taught by the Lord. The point of the paradox is that human works and achievements are so irrelevant in terms of obtaining salvation, the penny. Rather like the 100 pennies owed to the man who had been forgiven a 10,000 talent debt (18:28).

Preaching is a spiritual exercise for the benefit of the preacher. We could get the impression that the labourers were called to go out into the vineyard because the Lord felt sorry for them, standing idle with no work or livelihood- rather than because He needed them. If this was His motivation, He wouldn't have called anyone at the 11th hour, neither would he have paid them all the same wages if he was only using them for his benefit. God will call His people unto Himself without us doing a thing; and yet we have a responsibility and even a commission to

take Christ to the world. The fact God will call His people to Himself anyway does not exempt us from the duty of witnessing; and the process of this witnessing is so often for *our* benefit.

*Went their way-* We explained on 19:1 how there is a whole block of material presented in a long chiasmus, and this parable is the closing part of the section which began at the start of chapter 18. It's significant therefore that *aperchomai*, translated here to 'go [a] way', recurs twice in the section. The man with the colossal debt 'went his way' and imprisoned his slightly indebted brother (18:30), and the rich young man 'went away' sorrowful (19:22). In each case, men 'went their way' after having been confronted by extreme grace. The rich man in that despite not wanting to part with his wealth as requested, he could still be saved by grace; the man with the colossal debt who had it frankly forgiven. They 'went their way' into obscurity, unable to accept the grace offered. These weak, lazy labourers went *their* way to harvest at least a few for Christ, believing and clinging on to the Lord's desire to use even them despite their inadequacy.

20:5 *Again He went out-* The very same words used of how the Lord 'again went out' to teach the Gospel (Mk. 2:13).

*About the sixth and ninth hour- Peri* ("about") used in relation to time doesn't have to mean 'roughly at' that time, it could mean that throughout the sixth, ninth and eleventh hours, the Lord searched for workers. In this case we see an indication of His urgent need for workers. The harvest really is there to be brought in, all complaints that 'nobody is interested' are simply a reflection of a serious mismatch between the potential harvest and the approach being taken to harvesting it. Typically great effort is expended on trying to get people to sign up to a denominational position and be regular attenders at meetings- and if that fails, the feeling is that evangelism has failed because the harvest is simply not there, 'nobody is interested'. But the clear impression from this parable and others is that the harvest is indeed there- the problem in harvesting it is with the labourers. The work of harvesting isn't the same as doing a public relations exercise for a denomination. We may or may not succeed in getting folks to sign up for our denomination or fellowship; but the work of harvesting men and women into Christ isn't necessarily the same thing as that. And that work is guaranteed of success.

20:6- see on 22:8.

*The eleventh hour-* The servant goes at the 11th hour and hires the men who others had refused, presumably because they didn't look strong enough for the work. And they get paid the very same wage as those who had worked all day. This element of unreality serves to highlight the (humanly) irrational zeal of the Lord for the spread of the Gospel in the last days before His

return. He will take on anyone who is willing to work, no matter how feebly, no matter for how short a time; the fact they are standing there ready and willing to do their little bit is what is important to Him. A man does not usually go out between 4 and 5 p.m. looking for more labourers, with sunset approaching. He must have had an unusually great need for workers, racing against time to get the harvest in. And this is the very urgency of the Gospel, and the passion of the Lord's desire to get the harvest reaped. God could reap the harvest of the earth, requiring not help from man. But He has chosen to work through men in the preaching of the Gospel, and therefore the number of workers and their zeal reflects the amount of harvest of souls that can be reaped. The eternal destiny of others is therefore seen to depend on our extent of labour in preaching. It's also apparent that the amount of harvest was unreally huge- hence the unusual running backwards and forwards to get more workers. One expects the manager to know the size of the harvest and hire the right number of labourers at the start of the day. But in this parable, he doesn't. The awesome size of the potential harvest out there in this world means that *never* should we conclude that 'nobody's interested'. There is a *huge* harvest out there. And in passing, it can be noted that grapes have to be harvested at just the right time. If they're left even a day too long on the vine, the sugar content becomes too high and they are no use. We can perhaps infer that the parable describes a scene on a Friday, with the Sabbath coming on when nobody can work- and yet it is *just* the right day for reaping the harvest. This makes the obvious connection in our minds- that just before the Sabbath day of the Millennium, in the last days, there is an abnormally huge harvest to be reaped. And this would connect with other Biblical teaching about a great appeal being made to all nations, just prior to the Lord's return. The parable also yields the lesson that those men would not normally work for one hour. We are to imagine those men with families at home who needed feeding. No pay that day, no food. But they were willing to do at least something. And their generous Lord simply pitied their poverty, so he gave them a day's wage- even to the 11th hour workers. And this is the Lord who has graciously hired us. Likewise, no rich King who finds that the wedding of his son will be poorly attended would go out and invite beggars. The element of unreality is that he so wants every place filled. No human King, nor his son, would want riff raff at the wedding, just because his own class of people turned down the invitations. But the King of Heaven is unlike any human king. He wants others to share in the joy of His Son, and absolutely nobody is too low to share; and moreover, He has a compelling desire to fill those places. The implication is that the net is being spread wider and more compulsively as the days shorten unto the supper.

*Found others-* This parable forms the closing section of the block of material which began at the beginning of chapter 18 and which is arranged in a chiasmus [see 19:1]. The Lord's 'finding' of men to do His work connects with the 'finding' of the lost sheep in 18:13. These men whom the Lord 'finds' are the lost sheep. The parallel is thus between the lost sheep, the child brought into the midst, the man who owes 100 pence, the brother who sins against us... and now, the lazy or weak labourers who are saved by grace. The point of the section is that they must be accepted-



and the parable speaks of how those who have worked harder and longer will have a tendency not to do so. And that tendency may cost them their own salvation.

*Why do you stand...?*- The implication is almost that they should've gone to work without waiting to be invited. They should've been motivated by the tragedy of an amazing harvest wasting. Or perhaps the question was more rhetorical. Why were they idle? Why had nobody hired them? Because they were weak, lazy, had bad reputations, been fired by other employers, were too old to work effectively... And the Lord wanted them to be fully aware of their inadequacies before He sent them to do His harvesting work. The same is seen in how the Lord made the disciples perceive their own blindness and lack of faith- and *then* gave them the great commission. This is indeed the ultimate qualification for preaching work. And that is taught by the Lord's hand in life, not by Bible colleges or preparatory programs.

The parable of the labourers indicates that the Lord's desire for response to the Gospel will increase as the coming of the Kingdom advances. Apparently He increasingly is the Jesus who understands human weakness. There is an element of unreality in the parable; the servant goes at the 11th hour and hires the men who others had refused, presumably because they didn't look strong enough for the work. This element of unreality serves to highlight the (humanly) irrational zeal of the Lord for the spread of the Gospel in the last days before His return. The parable of the marriage supper explains why this is. We need to enter into the sense of urgency and tragedy which there was; the marriage of the King's son was going to be delayed because the guests didn't want to come. The shame, even anger, of the King (cp. God) and the bridegroom (cp. Christ) need to be imagined; and this really is the feeling of the Father and Son whenever the Gospel is rejected. And time and again it happens, from Sunday School kids to those hundreds who every year complete Bible study courses and turn away from the call.

20:7 *Nobody has hired us*- They answered honestly, recognizing that in the urgency of harvest, nobody had hired them. Their answer implied a recognition of their weakness- through old age, mental issues, laziness, bad reputation, physical weakness or disability. But it is twice emphasized that they "stood" in the marketplace and did not *sit* there, as is common in marketplaces in the Middle Eastern harvest time sun. Their saving feature was that they were willing to work, and they recognized their weakness; and they believed that they would be given an appropriate reward by this strangely gracious employer. This is so important, and forms almost the only precondition which the Lord requires to work with men. The Lord surely knew why they had not been hired. They had been there all day- so He had surely seen them when He had gone out looking for workers earlier that day. His question to them was therefore rhetorical. He wanted to elicit from them a recognition of their weakness. We also sense that as He would

have noticed them earlier in the day, He as it were was lowering the bar because He was as it were driven to do this by the chronic lack of labourers and the unexpectedly huge harvest. The same lowering of the bar just before the last day, the final end of the harvest, is seen in the parable of the street people being urged in to attend the majestic supper.

The Lord had earlier spoken of the disciples as labourers in the work of the Gospel, who were worthy of their hire (Lk. 10:7; Jn. 4:36 s.w.). The connection with that teaching is in that the Lord was inviting the disciples to see themselves as those who had been first hired, and was warning them that the potential harvest was so great that He was taking on other workers whom they would be tempted to despise. This is exactly the theme of the entire block of material which began with their rejection and despising of the little ones at the start of chapter 18.

*Whatever is right-* He imputes righteousness to His weak workers, so that payment for a day's work becomes that which is "right" for those who have only worked one hour.

20:8 *When evening was come-* The Lord's coming is likened to the dawn in Mal. 4, here to the sunset. The day of opportunity for service ends, and yet in another sense the sun arises heralding the eternal day of God's Kingdom.

*The Lord... his steward-* The Lord of the vineyard is presumably God, and His "steward", the duty manager, is the Lord Jesus.

*Call- Kaleo* is used both of the calling of men and women to the Gospel in this life, and also of the final call to judgment. In responding to the call, we are actually embarking upon a journey to judgment, and therefore as the Lord elsewhere explains, it is absurd if we uphold differences with our brother on that journey. We are on our way to judgment- that should humble us and impart a sense of urgency to every moment of this journey. Mt. 22:3 speaks of how the Lord's Angelic servants "call them that were bidden". But "call" and "bidden" both translate *kaleo*. The called ones are further called- to judgment.

*Give them their hire-* At the judgment, the preacher receives *wages* for what he did (Jn. 4:36), the labourers receive *hire* (s.w. wages) for their work in the vineyard (Mt. 20:8; 1 Cor. 3:8). There is a *reward* (s.w. wages) for those who rise to the level of loving the totally unresponsive (Mt.

5:46), or preaching in situations quite against their natural inclination (1 Cor. 9:18). *Salvation* itself isn't given on this basis of works; but the judgment is of works in order to teach us self-knowledge. And this is why there will be a 'going through' of our deeds. In this life, we see ourselves in a dark mirror; but only when the Lord appears will we clearly see ourselves face to face. This coming to true self-knowledge will only be possible through the judgment process. There is indeed a 'wage' paid for Gospel work; each man shall receive "his own reward [s.w. 'hire'] according to his labour"- but that "reward" is the fact that a man's work 'abides' through the fire of the final judgment (1 Cor. 3:8,14). So whilst the hire / reward / wage is on one hand salvation, it will also be unique to each of us and directly in proportion to the success of our work with others. If they enter the Kingdom, then that will be an aspect of our eternal reward, and thus Paul can say that his eternal "crown of rejoicing" is the likes of his Thessalonian converts standing approved at the final judgment (1 Thess. 2:19). So often, allegiance to a particular denominational way of thinking hinders believers from this work. They may read these words and find the idea somewhat strange, because they feel they have never brought anyone into the group they belong to. But the group we ultimately belong to is the body of Christ. The commission to take the Gospel to the world and baptize them is given to each of us. And so we do well to ask ourselves the question: 'How many times have I ever asked someone if they want to be baptized, offered to baptize them, and baptized someone?'. Fear of eldership displeasure and rejection from what is little more than a church social club has hamstrung so much such witness.

*Beginning from the last-* The giving of the payment begins at the last, which is an element of unreality in the story. The message may be that this was in order to teach the longer and harder working labourers that the wage really was a penny a day for each worker. The purpose of the judgment process will be for our benefit, and one of the hardest lessons for Christ's people is to accept that others who worked less than us are really also saved to the same extent and by the same grace as we are.

20:9- see on 25:23.

*About the eleventh hour-* I mentioned earlier that *peri* with time clauses can mean 'throughout'. The payment was at the twelfth hour; some had been hired at various points throughout the eleventh hour, meaning that they had worked far less than an hour. It outrages all human works-based justice to think that they received the same as those who slogged twelve hours. But this is to affront our sense of justification by works, and to demonstrate to us that salvation cannot be on the basis of works but rather on the basis of the contract / covenant which all by grace have entered into. And the parable has an even more demanding twist in its end stress, whereby those who considered this was unreasonable and felt they should be given more for their superior work

are in fact rejected for thinking that. If indeed “Go your way” means they are fired from the Master’s service.

*Every man a penny-* No employer really pays all workers the same amount as the 11<sup>th</sup> hour worker; no creditor would really cancel debts simply because the debtors can’t afford to pay, and take nothing at all from them; no father would really give preferential treatment to a wayward son over a son who had never disobeyed him. But the point is, God acts in the very opposite way to how we do or would do. His grace to sinners makes no human sense. And He asks us through these parables of His Son to walk out against the wind and follow His example in our treatment of sinners. Our own natural sense cries out that he who works most should have the most pay; but the unreality of the parable teaches us that this principle is set aside in the way God deals with us. *Any* gift from the Father and Son is by grace alone. The elements of unreality in the parables often bring out the extent of God’s grace. The fruit farmer [=God] asked His worker [=the Lord Jesus] to cut down a barren fig tree. But this worker had such fondness for the tree, he was so unusually concerned for it, that he pleaded that it be given some more time. This reflected the Lord’s love for Israel, a love beyond all reason. Likewise, which wealthy person would ever arrange a banquet and invite the very dregs of society to it? Here is the Father’s amazing grace. Sometimes we have to fill in the details [another feature of the Lord’s amazing stories] in order to perceive this grace. The younger son, for example, demanded his share of the inheritance; and thus he lost his name, forfeited any claim to family membership, and openly showed that he did not wish to be part of his father’s family. And yet he was received back with such grace and longing by the Father.

*Every man-* This addition of *ana* [“every man”] is to underline that they each, every one individually, received their pay. The sense would be conveyed quite adequately without the addition of this word, but the Lord wished to remind us of how each of us will personally meet the Lord at judgment day, and we will behold each of those whom we considered the little ones, inferior workers or believers to ourselves, receiving their rewards. The public aspect to the judgment process is several times brought out- e.g. the rejected will walk naked and others will see their shame (Rev. 16:15).

20:10 *They supposed-* NIV “they expected”. The connection is clearly to Peter’s expectation that he and the disciples who had forsaken what they had should be rewarded more than those who had not done so (19:27). We are led by the story line to sympathize with their position- our sense of human justice cries out against such an approach, whereby the harder workers were rewarded the same as the slacker and shorter workers. But that outcry is intended. Because the point is, that we are the colossally indebted man, saved by grace; the 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers who were too weak

and lazy to do much for their Lord. This parable forms an appropriate conclusion to the material which began at the start of chapter 18. The despising of the little ones by us is simply because we have failed to perceive that *we* are the 10,000 talent hopeless debtor, *we are the man... we are the weak workers*, etc.

Yet *nomizo*, “supposed”, is the verb of the noun *nomos*, the law. They believed it was their legal right to receive more than the later workers. But they had “agreed” in contract for a penny a day (:2). The law was not at all on their side. They only came to this new and very twisted view of their rights by observing the Lord’s grace to the weaker, shorter workers. Their eye or outlook became evil because of the Lord’s goodness. We too can come to assume that salvation is our right, failing to maintain any sense of wonder at God’s grace to us.

*More*- This again is particularly appropriate to Peter, who had to be forced to consider carefully whether he did in fact love the Lord “more” [s.w.] than others (Jn. 21:15).

20:11 *Murmured*- The word is repeatedly used concerning Israel’s murmuring against Christ (Lk. 5:30; Jn. 6:41,43; 7:32; 1 Cor. 10:10). These who murmured against Christ’s grace at the last day were therefore, we can conclude, under the influence of Jewish legalism and a sense of superiority to others. The tension is between them murmuring at the very moment in which they “received it”.

Those hired into the vineyard first "supposed (on judgment day) that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house... but he answered one of them (what's the significance of this?) and said, Friend (a description of the faithful, Jn. 15:15; James 2:23), I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is... I will give unto this last, even as unto thee" (Mt. 20:10-15). If the penny represents salvation, the harder workers only started questioning once they saw, to their amazement, the weaker and shorter workers receiving a penny. They received the promised reward of salvation, but couldn't understand the principles on which the Lord rewarded the weaker servants. If the hard working faithful will have a problem with this even at the judgment, how much more now?

20:12 *These last*- The Lord answers the question “Are there few that be saved?” by insisting that we personally strive to enter by the narrow door (Lk. 13:23,24). This was the same message the Lord had taught Peter through the parable of the 1<sup>st</sup> hour labourer getting distracted by the reward of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour one. He had that tendency to look on the faults of others (Mt. 18:21), to compare himself with others (Mt. 19:21 cp. 27; 26:33). John’s Gospel ends with Peter yet again being distracted by the possible spiritual destiny of his brother John- ‘What about *this* man?’ was answered by the Lord with an appeal to Peter to not worry about that but instead “You- follow Me”. And so, so many tragic times we do the same. We are distracted from the quintessence of our lives, the following, to death, of the Lord, by our jealousy of others and our desire to enter

into their spirituality rather than personally following. We should rather be like the weak old labourers in the parable who walk away from judgment day clutching their 'penny' [of salvation], thinking "I really shouldn't have this. I didn't work for a day, and this... this coin... this is a day's pay". But we will be there. You and me. For all our doubts and fears, our chronic lack of self worth, for all the inward, unspoken struggles to believe and understand, that nobody knows nor even notices. We will be there. This is grace, and this will be grace. Truly there is all joy and peace through believing these things, "that ye may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13).

Paul was ever aware of his own proneness to failure. He saw himself as tempted to be like the man in the parable who thought he should have more, because he had laboured more abundantly than the others (Mt. 20:12 Gk. = 2 Cor. 11:25).

*Have worked-* Clearly the harder workers believed that there was to be a direct connection between work and reward. And the purpose of the story is to debunk that idea.

*But one hour-* The labourers had been brought into the vineyard at various times. It was the scandal of the 11th hour labourers which so stuck in the gut of the original workers. And those 11th hour workers, at least in chronological terms, are us- called in these very last days. We therefore can see ourselves as the recipients of maximum grace- for we are hardly the strongest or most functional of the generations of Christ's servants, more focused as we are on internal grievances than on the massive work of getting the amazing harvest in.

*Made them-* This is precisely the same word used earlier in the verse to speak of how the weaker workers had 'worked' or, literally, 'made' only one hour. By accident, almost, these complaining labourers had stumbled upon the salvation by grace and imputed righteousness which Paul spells out in Romans in so many words. The strangely gracious Lord of the harvest had 'worked them' as worthy of a day's pay; He had imputed to them the work of a whole day when they had only done a fraction of that. And still the workers didn't get it. The story ends with them still in confusion. Some will be in the Kingdom who have big questions about the justice of God (Mt. 20:12,13 "friend"); the wise virgins, apparently selfishly, won't give any oil to the others; some will sit in the Kingdom in "shame" because they thought they were greater than other brethren (Lk. 14:9- cp. the elder brother?); some remonstrate that a highly rewarded brother already has ten pounds, and surely doesn't need any more exaltation (Lk. 19:25).

*Equal-* It was on this basis that they were all made "equal" before the final judgment. The basis of their unity, therefore, should have been- and indeed *is*- the fact that our salvation is by imputed righteousness. Peter surely learnt the lesson of all this when he spoke of how to the

Gentiles had been *given* by God the 'like' [s.w. "equal"] *gift* which had been given to "us", the Jewish disciples (Acts 11:17). In this sense the dimensions of the new Jerusalem are "equal" (Rev. 21:16 s.w.).

*Borne the burden*- The same words used for carrying the burden of the cross and of the sins and failures of others (Lk. 14:27; Jn. 19:17; Rom. 15:1). It can be no accident that here in Mt. 20 the Lord goes on to speak of His cross and the need to participate in that death through carrying the cross. Whenever we behold the cross, surely we are left with the deep impression that 'I would not have gone through with this'. But that is the burden we are to carry, and no amount of other works or attainment of standards can compensate for that. The disciples thought they could so easily carry that cross (20:22 "we are able"), just as these workers were sure that they had borne the required burden and should be rewarded for it. But in the light of the cross and of the demand implicit within it to likewise suffer in the salvation of little ones, the hard workers had carried nothing. Their salvation too was to be on the basis of total grace.

*Heat of the day*- This is the language of the day of judgment (2 Pet. 3:10,12; James 1:11). These hard workers had been through nothing- they had not been through the day of judgment, at which acceptance will be proportionate to our acceptance of other little ones.

20:13 *One of them*- The personal nature of the judgment is emphasized, as we saw in :9,10 where it is twice stated that the payment was given to each individual.

*Friend*- This term could imply that for all their blindness and unfounded sense of superiority over their brethren, these workers were still acceptable with the Lord. But the same word is used in 22:12 for the man who is condemned because he thinks his own clothing is good enough for the wedding, and will not take the garment of righteousness offered him; and it is also used by the Lord concerning Judas the betrayer (26:50). These more negative associations of "friend" must be considered together with the possibility that "Go your way..." means effectively 'You're fired!'. The idea that we are superior to our brethren because we achieved more than them is so obnoxious to the Lord that it may be the basis for the condemnation of such people. That is the undoubted implication and possibility. The structure of the parable leaves it somewhat unclear, because indeed the issue is unclear. The Lord may forgive the unforgiving, show grace to the ungracious- and save them. This would indeed be in line with His grace. But on the other hand, we are to understand that such arrogant and exclusive attitudes warrant condemnation before Him at the last day.

Note that before the Lord of the harvest, *having received* the 'penny' of salvation and Divine nature, those who thought they had worked hardest complained that those they thought had done less, were still getting a penny. They were rebuked, but they still had their penny (cp. salvation; Mt. 20:11). The subsequent comment that the first shall be last might imply that they will be in the Kingdom, but in the least place. Robert Roberts wrote that he was certain that the only response of the saints once they are given Divine nature will be to break down in tears. And I agree with him. And the passion of Jesus may mean He does likewise. Being Divine doesn't mean you don't cry- in whatever way Divine beings cry. Which is why, in some ways, there are tears in Heaven as we pass through our vales of tears down here. Some will be in the Kingdom who have big questions about the justice of God even then (Mt. 20:12,13 "friend"); some will sit in the Kingdom in "shame" because they thought they were greater than other brethren (Lk. 14:9- cp. the elder brother?)- i.e. self-imposed shame and embarrassment; some remonstrate that a highly rewarded brother already has ten pounds, and surely doesn't need any more exaltation (Lk. 19:25). This all suggests that even after our acceptance at the judgment, we may be more 'human' (or whatever word I should use) than we may now imagine. More emotional, more seeking towards understanding, with a greater potential for eternal growth, than perhaps we have thought. Divine nature doesn't mean being passionless. Whichever hymn writer called the Kingdom "passionless renown" just, quite frankly, got it wrong [or was trying too hard to rhyme his words]. Because God *is* passionate; and we will share *His* nature.

There is even here the possible implication that some who will be accepted by the Lord who even at their acceptance at the judgment have wrong attitudes towards their brethren. Thus before the Lord of the harvest, those who thought they had worked hardest complained that those they thought had done less, were still getting a penny. They were rebuked, but they still had their penny (cp. salvation; Mt. 20:11). The subsequent comment that the first shall be last might imply that they will be in the Kingdom, but in the least place. Likewise the brother who takes the highest place in the ecclesia will be made with shame to take the lower place (Lk. 14:9). Or the bitter elder brother, angry at the Father's gracious enthusiasm for the worthless brother, is addressed by the Father (God) in language which is relevant to the Lord Jesus: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" (Lk. 15:30). These sentiments are elsewhere expressed about the Lord Jesus. Is the implication that bitter elder brother is still in Christ and accepted in Him, even though his attitude to his brother is not what it should be? The least in the Kingdom will be those who break commandments *and teach men so* (Mt. 5:19); but the least in the Kingdom will be counted greater than John the Baptist was in this life (Mt. 11:11). The simple message is that there will be some in the Kingdom who simply weren't very obedient in this their day of probation. Admittedly, these details are capable of other interpretations. But bear these points in mind, especially if you ever struggle with the apparent harshness of some Christians you may meet.



*I do you no wrong-* The grace shown by one to another can be perceived by a third party as a personal attack upon that third party. But that is just an illusion, a game of the mind- and yet it explains why there is so much anger with the Lord because of His grace to others. The hard workers felt the Lord was personally doing them wrong- when instead He was giving them exactly what He had promised and what they had hoped for.

*Didn't you agree?-* The question arises as to what exactly the Lord was supposed to give these men beyond a penny. Likewise, the Lord can give us no more than salvation, the penny. The fact He may give it to those we consider far beneath our level, doesn't mean that somehow He must give us more than salvation.

20:14 *Take-* This is a slightly strange way of talking about a penny which the Lord had given to the worker. It might imply that the worker had thrown it down on the ground in protest. Or the sense of 'take away' which is in the Greek may suggest 'Take it and go away from Me', lending weight to the possibility that the subsequent "Go your way" is effectively a firing of the man from the Master's service- a hint that the penalty for superior thinking concerning little ones is in fact rejection by the Lord.

*Yours-* Salvation will be intensely personal, it will be as it were 'our very own'. Having been faithful in what the Lord entrusted to us in this life, we will receive at the day of judgment "that which is your [very] own" (Lk. 16:12).

*Go your way-* This could be interpreted as meaning 'You're fired'. Harry Whittaker was a great fan of this view in his *Studies in the Gospels*. Perhaps the hard working labourers were sent packing by the Lord because of their complaint at the others getting the same payment for what they considered to be inferior work to theirs. If the parable is meant to be read in this way, then it seems so sad that those hard working men (cp. brethren) were *almost* saved, but for their attitude to their brethren.

*I will-* Here and in :15, *thelo*, "I will", doesn't mean 'I want' but rather to choose, to be disposed to. The idea connects with the conclusion in :16, that the saved are those who are "chosen". These ideas of a sovereign undeserved gift, the will of God, Divine choice and election [*elektos* is the word used for "chosen" in :16] are all found again in Romans, where Paul makes the same point more pointedly and directly: Salvation cannot be by works, but by grace. And the element

of election and predestination within the final algorithm of human salvation is proof enough that works are not and cannot be of paramount importance.

20:15 *Is it not lawful*- This is another connection with the earlier part of the chiasmus which began in chapter 18. In this case, to the question of 19:3 as to whether it is “lawful” [s.w.] to divorce a wife for any reason. The Lord’s answer had lifted the question to higher levels, by arguing that the spirit of the law was to forgive marital failure without limit. He is expanding upon that thought here, by teaching that the spirit of ‘law’ is to accept the weak believer, the little one, the sinner, with no regard to their works but rather upon the basis of their having entered and ‘agreed’ to the covenant of grace. He imputes righteousness to His weak workers, so that payment for a day’s work becomes that which is “right” for those who have only worked one hour.

*Your eye evil*- A figure for mean spiritedness (Dt. 15:9; Prov. 23:6). They should have been generous spirited, and the connection is clearly to the colossal debtor in the parable at the end of chapter 19, who should've been generous to his indebted brother. God's grace to us, the honour of having served Him so long, should mean that we are happy at the inclusion of those who appear far less than us, which is the context of this entire section of material which began in chapter 18. And the Lord’s words here are so tragically and frequently true to observation in spiritual life. The grace shown by some towards others who are clearly morally or doctrinally weaker provokes untold anger towards those who are showing the grace. This explains why otherwise nice natured believers can shake in rage, use expletives and behave with unnatural anger towards those whom they perceive as opening the circle, weakening the boundaries behind which they have hidden, by welcoming in the children, the little ones who are apparently so far beneath other believers in faith and behaviour. Their eye clouds over as evil as they behold the grace of others. There are Biblical examples of this, but the hatred towards the Lord Jesus Himself, hatred unto the death of the cross, is proof enough. And the same path was followed by men of grace such as Paul and Peter.

"Is your eye evil, because I am good" was quarried from Jonah 4:2-4, where Jonah is also asked a similar question after his bitterness that God had allowed Nineveh to repent. We must be aware that such self-righteousness and uncomfortableness at the repentance of others is a feature of our very essential nature. The Lord Jesus overcame this aspect of His nature superbly.

The pureness of the grace of the Lord Jesus is hard to plumb. He knew that the extent of His grace would cause others to stumble. The element of unreality in the parable of the labourers shows this. He hired the labourers no-one else wanted, the old and weak workers, some of them

only for an hour, and still gave them a day's pay. They must have walked away from the pay table with their heads spinning, scarcely daring to believe what they held in their hands- a matchless picture of the response of the faithful after learning of their acceptance at the day of judgment. But the outlook of those who felt their salvation (the penny) was less by grace than the others became bitter: "Is your eye evil, because I am good?". In saying this, the Lord was referring back to Dt. 15:9, which warned Israel not to have an evil eye towards their poverty stricken brother (cp. the unwanted labourer) who asked for a loan near the time of the year of release, when all debts were cancelled. In the year of release, Israel were "to remit every private debt... and not *demand* it of thy brother" (Dt. 15:2 LXX). This is behind Mt. 18:28, where Christ speaks of the man who demands repayment from his brother. The Lord is implying: You should live in the spirit of the year of release all the time, giving without expecting. Lk. 6:35 has the year of release in mind, in the idea of lending without expecting anything back. This only happened in the year of release. "Is thine eye evil, because I am good" is therefore saying that the Lord's grace towards the poverty-stricken labourer had provoked an "evil eye" in the others, they somehow felt that they were having to give to him, that they were standing to lose by his acceptance. Yet, as the Lord implies, this is a nonsense attitude. Of course we don't stand to lose anything by another's acceptance! And it's possible to reason that it was those 11th hour labourers represent the accepted, whilst the complainers are rejected ("Go thy way" has been read by some as meaning they were fired whilst the others were taken on permanently). But with what superb accuracy does He get right inside the future mentality of many in His ecclesia! How very true this parable has been time and again in the history of our community. Discussion of and practice of the idea of grace has provoked untold bitterness amongst those who live less by grace.

20:16 *Last shall be first*- The entire section beginning in chapter 18 has taught that those who refuse to forgive and accept the spiritually weak- will in fact be condemned. And yet the section also speaks of the possibility that they will be saved, just as the rich are told to sell what they have and give to the poor, if they "will be perfect"- otherwise they will be condemned. But the Lord says that salvation even in that case is "possible" with God, by grace. Therefore the section concludes on the same note- on one hand hinting at the condemnation of the hardest workers because of their despising of their weaker brethren, whilst on another hand suggesting that they shall be in the Kingdom, although "last" in the Kingdom, due to their superior attitudes.

*Few chosen*- This is the conclusion to the large chiasmus of material which began at 18:1 (see on 19:1). The conclusion is that salvation is partly on the basis of predestination- some are simply chosen, others aren't. The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Paul speaks of choosing and predestination in the context of seeking to persuade believers that salvation is by the gift of grace and not according to works- and he could well have been prompted to that

thinking by the Lord's usage of 'choosing' here. God uses language in a relative sense in order to emphasize something. Thus we read of many being saved (Gen. 22:17), yet in another sense few will be saved (Mt. 7:14; 20:16; Lk. 13:23). Relative to the wonder of salvation, many will be saved; but numerically, the figure will be small, from the perspective of this world. See on 11:30; 25:19.