

Historic Commentary

(16th Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 20](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[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.

[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.

[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 marketplace,” 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.

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.

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.”

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.

Gregory the Great: But we can ask why those who were called, even though late, to the kingdom are said to murmur. No one who murmurs receives the kingdom of heaven, and no one who receives it can murmur. Our ancestors up to the Lord’s coming, however righteous their lives, were not let into the kingdom until he came down, who by his death opened up the paradise that had been closed to the human race. Their murmuring means that they lived in such a way as to obtain the kingdom and yet were kept for a long time from obtaining it.... We who come at the eleventh hour do not murmur after our labor, and we received a denarius. After our Mediator’s coming into the world, we are led to the kingdom as soon as we leave the body. We obtain with no delay what our ancestors obtained only after waiting a long time.

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.”

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?”

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.

Gregory the Great: The householder said to them, “I wish to give to this last one as I give even to you.” And since the obtaining of his kingdom comes from his good will, he properly adds, “Or am I not allowed to do what I wish?” It is always foolish to question the goodness of God. There might have been reason for loud complaint if he did not give what he owed but not if he gives what he does not owe. And so he adds, “Or is your eye evil because I am good?” But no one should boast of his work or of his time, when after saying this Truth cries out: “So the last will be first and the first last.” We know what good things we have done and how many they are; we do not know with what exactitude our judge on high will investigate them. Indeed, we must all rejoice exceedingly to be even the last in the kingdom of God.

Gregory the Great: But what follows after this is dreadful. For many are called, but few are chosen; many come to the faith, and only a few are brought to the heavenly kingdom. See how many have gathered for today’s celebration; we fill the church! But yet who knows how few may be numbered in the flock of God’s elect. All voices shout “Christ,” but not everyone’s life shouts it. Many follow God with their voices but flee from him by their conduct. Paul says, “They profess that they know God, but they deny him by their deeds”; and James, “Faith without works is worthless”; and the Lord says through the psalmist, “O Lord my God, you have multiplied your wonderful works, and in your thoughts there is none who shall be likened to you. I declared and spoke of them. They exceed number.” At the Lord’s call the faithful were increased more than he could count, because they also come to the faith who do not belong to the number of the elect. In this world they mingle with the faithful through their confession of faith, but in the next they do not merit to be counted in the ranks of the faithful because of their wicked way of life. The sheepfold of our holy church receives goats together with lambs, but as the Gospel bears witness, when the judge comes he will separate the good from the evil as a shepherd sets the sheep apart from the goats. Those who are subject to the pleasures of their bodies here cannot be counted as sheep there. The judge will separate from the ranks of the humble those who now exalt themselves on the horns of pride. Those who share the heavenly faith in this life but seek the earth with their whole desire cannot obtain the kingdom of heaven.

John Calvin: As this parable is nothing else than a confirmation of the preceding sentence, the last shall be first, it now remains to see in what manner it ought to be applied. Some commentators reduce it to this general proposition, that the glory of all; will be equal, because the heavenly inheritance is not obtained by the merits of works, but is bestowed

freely. But Christ does not here argue either about the equality of the heavenly glory, or about the future condition of the godly. He only declares that those who were first in point of time have no right to boast or to insult others; because the Lord, whenever he pleases, may call those whom he appeared for a time to disregard, and may make them equal, or even superior, to the first. If any man should resolve to sift out with exactness every portion of this parable, his curiosity would be useless; and therefore we have nothing more to inquire than what was the design of Christ to teach. Now we have already said that he had no other object in view than to excite his people by continual spurs to make progress. We know that indolence almost always springs from excessive confidence; and this is the reason why many, as if they had reached the goal, stop short in the middle of the course. Thus Paul enjoins us to forget the things which are behind, (Philippians 3:13,) that, reflecting on what yet remains for us, we may arouse ourselves to persevere in running. But there will be no harm in examining the words, that the doctrine may be more clearly evinced.

Matthew 20:1. For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder.

The meaning is, that such is the nature of the divine calling, as if a man were, early in the morning, to hire laborers for the cultivation of his vineyard at a fixed price, and were afterwards to employ others without an agreement, but to give them an equal hire. He uses the phrase, kingdom of heaven, because he compares the spiritual life to the earthly life, and the reward of eternal life to money which men pay in return for work that has been done for them.

For strictly speaking, he owes no man any thing, and from us, who are devoted to his service, he demands, as a matter of right, all the duties which are incumbent on us. But as he freely offers to us a reward, he is said to hire the labors which, on other grounds, were due to him. This is also the reason why he gives the name of a hire to the crown which he bestows freely. Again, in order to show that we have no right to complain of God, if he make us companions in honor with those who followed us after a long interval, he borrowed a comparison from the ordinary custom of men, who bargain about the hire, before they send laborers to their work.

If any man infer from this, that men are created for the purpose of doing something, and that every man has his province assigned him by God, that they may not sit down in idleness, he will offer no violence to the words of Christ. We are also at liberty to infer,

that our whole life is unprofitable, and that we are justly accused of indolence, until each of us regulate his life by the command and calling of God. Hence it follows, that they labor to no purpose, who rashly undertake this or that course of life, and do not wait for the intimation of the call of God. Lastly, we learn from the words of Christ, that those only are pleasing to God, who labor for the advantage of their brethren.

Vs 16. So the first shall be last.

He does not now compare the Jews to the Gentiles, (as in another passages) nor the reprobate, who swerve from the faith, to the elect who persevere; and therefore the sentence which is introduced by some interpreters, many are called, but few are chosen, does not apply to that point. Christ only meant to say that everyone who has been called before others ought to run with so much the greater alacrity, and, next, to exhort all men to be modest, not to give themselves the preference above others, but willingly to share with them a common prize. As the apostles were the first-fruits of the whole church, they appeared to possess some superiority; and Christ did not deny that they would sit as judges to govern the twelve tribes of Israel. But that they might not be carried away by ambition or vain confidence in themselves, it was necessary also to remind them that others, who would long afterwards be called, would be partakers of the same glory, because God is not limited to any person, but calls freely whomsoever He pleases, and bestows on those who are called whatever rewards He thinks fit.