

## 20:1–16 *Laborers in the Vineyard*

**HUMBLE LABORERS.** NIELS HEMMINGSEN: Whether your labor be profitable and commanded to you by the householder, you may know by two things, namely by the commandment, and by your calling. Every labor that makes to the planting, watering, cherishing, and preserving of this vineyard, has a commandment: that is to wit, the labor that serves to the glory of God, the edifying of the church ... is commanded by God in the first table and in the fourth commandment. Besides this, it is not enough that you are commanded to labor, unless you be enabled to labor by lawful vocation. For he that takes upon him to labor in the vineyard without calling, is rash and brings forth no fruit.

In laboring you must beware, first, that you be not proud if you seem to yourself to labor more or also better than another. Second, that you have not an eye to the reward of your labor performed, but to the commandment of the householder, who has set you in his vineyard, to the intent you should work. Third, that you despise not such as work less than yourself. And fourth, that you grudge not against the master of the house, though he appears generous to those who seem to have wrought less than you.

What is to be looked unto, and continually to be thought upon while you are working: First it behooves everyone to think they are brought into the Lord's vineyard, not to be idle, but to work. For in the Lord's vineyard there is no room for sloth and sluggishness. No one can—without displeasing the master of the house—put over their talk to another person. Therefore, whosoever is brought into this vineyard, let them labor diligently without deceit. For cursed is the one who does the Lord's work deceitfully. Second, in laboring, let them think they stand in their mas-

ter's fight, who not only beholds the outward doings but also sees the secrets of the heart, and esteems the work by the meaning of the heart, rather than by the effect of the work. Third, this looking on of the master shall stir up the laborer to work heedfully, that they may with a cheerful mind bear out the heat and burden of the day. Fourth, an eye is to be had to nothing else than to the goodness of the householder, God, which commands to labor; and that one thing alone will encourage a person to go through with their task lustily. Fifth, when you have done all that you can do, you shall say you are an unprofitable servant. For if you either be proud because you came sooner into the Lord's vineyard or despise others that may seem to have wrought less than you, or murmur against the good man of the house who is a like liberal to others as to you.... Three things are here found fault within the murmurers. First, that they presume upon the worthiness of their work. Second, that they do not commend and set forth the liberality of the householder, but rather blame him for it. Third, that they envy others for the bountifulness of the liberal householder toward them. Such are all they that seek to justify themselves by works, being utterly void of faith. A POSTILL, OR EXPOSITION OF THE GOSPELS.<sup>1</sup>

**SELF-RIGHTEOUS SELF-ASSESSMENT.** WOLFGANG MUSCULUS: Here we get a depiction of the kind of laborers that God finds most pleasing: He prefers those in whom he can manifest his own goodness. They are those who work for no fixed reward, but, motivated by a faith in God's goodness, submitted and went to work. They are happy with whatever they receive, since they know that they deserve nothing. To

<sup>1</sup>Hemmingsen, *A Postill, or Exposition of the Gospels* (1569), 67–68\*.

make this clear, Christ constructed a parable where payment begins with the most recent, as a way of admonishing the disciples that God does not value so much work and effort as a grateful spirit, humility, and dependency on his goodness. For, how much did those latest workers accomplish in the vineyard in the span of one hour?

“And they thought that they would receive more.” Why so? Was it because they had derived that assurance for themselves from the goodness of the owner of the vineyard? No, not at all, but from an estimation of their own labor. For, they were comparing their own work with the modest labor of the more recent workers, and they were concluding that if those people receive so much, we deserve a lot more. This is clear from the fact that they begin to grumble, saying, “Those more recent workers worked only for an hour, and you made them equal to us who bore the weight of the day and the heat.”

We should take note of the nature of the self-righteous in this passage, how perverse and depraved they are, and as such, cannot please God, and they exhibit three great vices. The first is that they think that, even contrary to the agreement made, they will receive pay as merited by their works. In this way the self-righteous usually value their own works highly. The second is that they envy the merciful kindness of God to newcomers, about which they should be rejoicing and praising his goodness along with his grace. But see, they exhibit envy toward their brothers and they devalue their work and hold it in contempt.

The third is that which follows from those depraved emotions, namely, that they murmur against the landowner’s fairness, charging him with being wicked.... Then, when they [i.e., the self-righteous] hear that the

preaching of the grace of the gospel is so great that prostitutes and sinners will enter into the kingdom of heaven, they audaciously say that if God does this he will not be righteous. Then they too will envy those who are saved by the grace of the Lord and will murmur against the goodness of the Lord, when one day they see sinners and the last placed before themselves. And likewise, will it be declared to them then how no harm is being done and how God in his goodness can save whom he wishes, and how salvation does not rest upon human merits, but on the kindness of God's grace. COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW.<sup>2</sup>

**THE FIRST WILL BE LAST. MARTIN LUTHER:** We will let such fables pass and abide by the simple teaching and meaning of Christ, who wishes to show by this parable how it actually is in the kingdom of heaven or in Christendom upon the earth; that God here directs and works wonderfully by making the first last and the last first. And all is spoken to humble those who are great that they should trust in nothing but the goodness and mercy of God. And on the other hand, that those who are nothing should not despair, but trust in the goodness of God just as the others do. Therefore we must not consider this parable in every detail, but confine ourselves to the leading thought, that which Christ designs to teach by it. We should not consider what the coin means, not what the first or the last hour signifies; but what the householder had in mind and what he aims to teach, how he desires to have his goodness esteemed higher than all human works and merit, even that his mercy alone must have all the praise....

<sup>2</sup> Musculus, *In Evangelistam Matthaeum Commentarii* (1556), 519–20.

Therefore, if one were to interpret it critically, the coin would have to signify temporal good, and the favor of the householder, eternal life. But the day and the heat we transfer from temporal things to the conscience, so that work-righteous persons do labor long and hard, that is, they do all with a heavy conscience and an unwilling heart, forced and coerced by the law; but the short time or last hours are the light consciences that live blessed lives, led by grace, and that willingly and without being driven by the law. Thus they have now each a coin, that is, a temporal reward is given to both. But the last did not seek it; it was added to them because they sought first the kingdom of heaven and consequently they have the grace to everlasting life and are happy. The first however seek the temporal reward, bargain for it and serve for it; and hence they fail to secure grace and by means of a hard life they merit perdition. For the last do not think of earning the coin, nor do they thus blunder, but they receive all. When the first saw this, by a miscalculation they thought they would receive more, and lost all. Therefore, we clearly see, if we look into their hearts, that the last had no regard for their own merit but enjoyed the goodness of the householder. The first however did not esteem the goodness of the householder, but looked to their own merits, and thought it was theirs by right and murmured about it. SERMON FOR SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY.<sup>3</sup>

**THE INWARD CALLING OF A TRUE LABORER.** JUAN DE VALDÉS: From the words, whence it seems that Christ took occasion to utter this parable, and from the words with which it concludes ... it is readily inferred that it is his intention to show how the first shall be last and the last first. Where it is to be

<sup>3</sup>Luther, *Precious and Sacred Writings*, 11:106–9; citing [Mt 6:33](#).

understood that the householder is God; the vineyard is the church; which, as Christ has showed in other parables, comprises good and bad; the laborers, who go to dig the vineyard, are we all; and the householder's steward is Christ. And it is so, that all who enter into the church, enter, being called of God, but some are so with only the outward calling, which is the preaching of the gospel, while others are so, both outwardly and inwardly.

They who enter with only the outward call, believing by report, they never understand the righteousness of Christ, and pretending to attain eternal life by their works, laboring and wearying themselves by day and by night, they find themselves to be so rich in outward works, that they hold themselves to be the first in the kingdom of God. While those who enter with the outward and with the inward call, believing by revelation, they embrace the righteousness of Christ, and as they do not work in order to be righteous, but because they are righteous, however much they may work, it always appears to them that they work but little, and thus they hold themselves to be last in the kingdom of God. But when Christ shall come to judgment, he will admit those who hold themselves to be last, and he will cast out from the kingdom those who hold themselves to be first; disregarding the amount of works done by both, but regarding the faith and the intention with which they will have worked. Whence will result the murmurs of those who will be excluded from the kingdom, who will plead their good works; but their pleas will profit them but little.... Here I will add two things. The one, that this is ever thus, that they, who, according to human judgment, are first, for that they are very rich in outward works are according to divine judgment, last, for they work without faith; and just as

faith, without works of faith, is worth nothing, so works without faith are worth nothing. While, on the other hand, they who, according to human judgment, are last, as being poor in outward works are first according to the divine judgment. COMMENTARY UPON THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Valdés, *Commentary upon the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 352–54.