

## Hard Work

**Matthew 20:1-16** "For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup> After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup> And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, <sup>4</sup> and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' <sup>5</sup> So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. <sup>6</sup> 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?' <sup>7</sup> They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' <sup>8</sup> And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' <sup>9</sup> And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. <sup>10</sup> Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. <sup>11</sup> And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, <sup>12</sup> 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.' <sup>13</sup> But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? <sup>14</sup> Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. <sup>15</sup> Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' <sup>16</sup> So the last will be first, and the first last."

*In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

1        You enjoy it when Jesus gives the rich a solid rebuking. When He told the rich young man to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor, just before today's Gospel reading, it gave you no small amount of pleasure. When Jesus told of the rich man who feasted sumptuously while Lazarus had to fend off the dogs to eat from the rich man's garbage, and when that rich man got what was coming to him in hell, it gave you relief. To hear that it's harder for a rich man to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle is a sweet, self-righteous symphony to your ears. The more often Jesus makes wealth look sinful, the more you can console yourself for not having as much luxury as you might prefer.

2        The rich, it seems, don't know the meaning of hard work, of sacrifice. Too many luxuries make life too easy, too free from suffering, too comfortable. And you take pride in your middle-class mindset and your Protestant work ethic. You know the meaning of "hard work," and you're proud of it. That is, until Jesus tells the parable from today's Gospel lesson. In this parable, it's no longer the rich who are called to repentance and

the hard-working middle class who are exalted as righteous. Those who do little work are rewarded, and those who work hard are rebuked. The master continued to hire workers for the day even up until the last hour of the work day. When he lined them up to give them their due reward for their work, he started with those who arrived last, who spent eleven hours just standing around while the first workers hired spent those eleven hours laboring in the vineyard. These who worked only an hour received a whole denarius, the wage for a full day's work. So when those who worked all 12 hours came to get paid, they expected a lot more than the fair wage they agreed to work for. So they felt slighted when they receive the same pay as those who worked only an hour of the day.

3 It seems an insult to hard work that the last workers were paid first and received just as much. Has your hard work been similarly insulted? Do you watch with indignation as others around you seem to shirk their responsibility to labor in the Lord's church? Do you look with contempt at those who seem not to know what hard work is? Do you have nothing but disdain for a Christian Johnny-come-lately, a sinner of ill-repute who repents on his death bed while you've worked your whole life at being a good person? Do you seethe with anger at the notion that the master would reward these hour-long workers with more than they deserved? If so, be warned. You who feel that your work in the Lord's church will earn you a rich reward, you who feel that your holy living will earn you the Lord's favor, you who begrudge the Master's generosity, repent. Repent lest you find yourselves last when you thought yourselves to be first.

4 A worker deserved a denarius for a day's work. But your so-called righteous works do not even qualify as work in the Lord's vineyard. Your work in the Lord's church is self-righteous. Your obedience to the Lord's commandments is only whitewash over your sinful hearts and prideful motivations. Even the disciples grew frustrated of Jesus' lofty standards. They had left everything to follow him. They had worked in the vineyard

since the first hour. But even they recognized the impossibility of earning the Lord's favor. They were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" No one. That's the point. You can't save yourself. Thinking of your works as righteous only makes them evil. And thinking of yourself as first will only make you last. So repent.

5 The task of salvation was hard work. Jesus answered the disciples' question just before He told them today's parable: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." You don't even deserve to be last in the kingdom of heaven. That would be an honor. But your sinful rebellion would cause you to be cast out of the Lord's presence altogether, damned for eternity. Except the Firstborn of all creation, the One present with God the Father at the beginning, the One through whom all things were made, the First, became last. The Son of God left His rightful place and became the last, became despised, rejected, the hated of humanity. He took human flesh and was born to work in the vineyard in your place. He labored at God's Law and kept it perfectly. But He received no reward. Instead, He received your punishment. On the cross the Sinless Son of God, Jesus Christ, died as the worst sinner.

6 The First became the Last so that you, the last, might be given the reward of the first. Because your Lord paid for them, your sins have been forgiven. This is the generosity of the Master of the Vineyard: to give you a gift instead of a wage. Your sins earned you death, but you have received life and salvation instead. Because of Christ's labor in the vineyard, you have received His reward, an eternal inheritance; you are a beloved child of God. He who supposes himself worthy of the Lord's favor, supposes himself to be the first, the hardest worker, disqualifies himself for it, becomes the last. But he who supposes himself unworthy of the Lord's favor, who despises himself for being unable to work hard enough, to him is given forgiveness of sins. He becomes the first.

7 Your Lord labored for you, accomplished the hard work, the impossible task of saving sinners, for you. He shed His blood for you. He is, as St. Paul said, the Rock from which flows life-giving water and cleansing blood. As your forefathers drank in the wilderness from the rock struck with Moses' staff, so you drink from the Rock struck with the punishment for sin and pierced by the soldier's spear. Here, at His holy altar, your Lord gives you food and drink for the journey, the life-giving, sin-forgiving Body and Blood of Jesus is given to you who could have never deserved so great a reward. Here, you are the first in the kingdom of heaven, the recipients of the Lord's favor.

8 Hard work earns you nothing. Instead, your Lord has set you free from the work of earning His favor. He has given you grace and mercy, His favor. Having delivered you from working to obtain your own salvation, He has set you free to work in His vineyard. You are free to live as the recipient of His mercy, showing mercy to those around you. You are free to live as His beloved child, being a diligent and faithful parent to your own children. You are free to live, not begrudging the Lord's mercy, but inviting others to share in that mercy. You're free to work hard, to do good works because the Lord has already lavished His grace upon you and saved you from working for your salvation.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*Soli Deo Gloria*  
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