

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Matthew 20:1-16

Year A - Proper 20, Text: Matthew 20:1-16
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The “Parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard” is found only in Matthew. The storyline focuses on a landowner’s surprising generosity and points to the equality of all disciples in relation to the “reward” of inheriting eternal life.

Immediately following the parable, Jesus predicts His coming passion for the third time (20:17–19). This third passion prediction sets the stage for the request of the mother of James and John, who comes seeking a special status for her two sons (20:20–28). The passage about two uncomprehending disciples and their mother is designed to be read in close connection with the narrative that follows in which Jesus heals two blind men (20:29–34).

The parable is bracketed by Jesus’ words on the shocking reversal in store for the first and the last; see 19:30 and 20:16. It follows up on Peter’s anxious question (19:27), “We have left everything and followed You. What then will we have?” Behind Peter’s question is the thought, “What then will we, the first twelve disciples, receive — and what will I, the first among the twelve, get as a reward?”

Standing where it does in Matthew’s Gospel, the parable is part of Jesus’ response to Peter’s outburst and is directed at church leaders of the earliest generation and their nervous successors, who are anxious about rewards for their efforts and are vying for privileged positions. The parable is an excellent prelude to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (ch. 21) and His final days in that city.

Verse 20:1: The landowner is not an enormously wealthy absentee landlord, but an independent grower with a vineyard (a symbol of God’s people, Isaiah 5:1–7; Jeremiah 12:10). The vineyard is too large for him to work entirely on his own. He walks to the village square at about six in the morning to hire laborers. Poor agricultural workers showed up in the market place each morning hoping to be hired — hoping to exchange their energy and ability for a piece of silver

to keep their families fed, housed, and clothed.

Verse 20:2: The landowner contracts with some laborers for a denarius (the regular day’s wage) per day. A denarius was the minimum daily income required to sustain a small family.

Verses 20:3–5: Anxious about the harvest, the owner returns to the square to hire additional hands at 9 a.m., midday, and 3 p.m. He promises to pay whatever is right.

Verses 20:6–7: It is astonishing that late in the day, at 5 o’clock in the evening, the landowner sends still more workers into the vineyard. Although one could question why he does this at such a late hour, the parable itself focuses on the exact number of hours worked and on the hope of payment cherished by those peasants as they compare work hours. The elaborate, but somewhat artificial, details build a pattern of expectation.

Verse 20:8: At quitting time, around 6 p.m. in the evening, the workers line up in an order that is the absolute reverse of anything like seniority related to work hours. The landowner’s manager, acting on his master’s instructions, pays out their wages beginning with the last hired up to the first hired.

Verses 20:9–10: When those who had worked for only one hour each receive a denarius, the others possibly cheer the landowner’s generosity, expecting that they will receive proportionately more. But each of them also receives a denarius.

Verses 20:11–12: When those hired first, who have borne the burden of the day and scorching heat, see that they receive no more than those hired near the close of the day, they grumble against the landowner.

Verses 20:13–14: One vocal laborer is pictured as representing all those who had been hired at the beginning of the day, and speaks up as Peter had done (v.19:27). To that one — and through him to all his

companions — the owner responds, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong.” He explains to the man that he is giving him (and to all whom he hired early in the morning) precisely what they had agreed on.

Verse 20:15: As to his generosity toward latecomers, the owner protests that he has the right to do as he pleases with his property. Then he asks, “Are you envious because I am generous?” The sentence literally reads, “Is your eye evil (jealous or greedy, cf. 6:22–23) because I am good?” (cf. 19:16).

Verse 20:16: In this parable, Jesus is not announcing a set of rules to guide the economies of the nations until doomsday. He is vividly describing two contrasting patterns of human conduct. On the one hand, behavior is totally determined by a web of contractual relationships where everything is precisely weighed, recorded, calculated, and balanced.

But the parable contrasts such civilized calculations with shocking and undeserved generosity, with an unbounded and energetic goodness that simply reaches out in blessing. The landowner’s actions are based on goodness and generosity. The laborer’s response is based on greed and envy!

Although in Jesus’ day, some Jewish rabbis taught that the most righteous will receive the most privileged place (at the Seventh Level, with the best sofas and best food) in the life to come, Jesus teaches that those welcomed into His Eternal Home will dwell and dine at the same level. To Him alone be the glory!