

A JUST AND GRACIOUS LANDOWNER: THE PARABLE OF LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD IN MATTHEW 20:1-16

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ABSTRACT

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16 presents a landowner who gives an identical wage to laborers who have worked for unequal lengths of time. This article interprets the passage through Ruben Zimmermann's integrative hermeneutical approach, which takes seriously the historical, literary, socio-cultural, metaphorical, contextual, and reader-oriented dimensions of parabolic communication. Zimmermann's six characteristics of parables — narrativity, fictionality, realism, metaphoricity, appellative structure, and co-textuality/contextuality — provide the framework for this reading. It is argued that the parable is not primarily an economic model of remuneration but a theological narrative about the gracious character of the kingdom of heaven. The landowner is interpreted as a just and gracious landowner whose actions challenge conventional calculations of merit and reward. Through narrative analysis, socio-historical mapping, symbolic exploration, and contemporary horizon-opening, the parable emerged as a polyvalent narrative that exposes the spiritual pathology of envy and calls disciples to receive grace gratefully while rejoicing when grace is extended to others as well.

Keywords: Parable, Just and Gracious Landowner, Laborers, Generosity, Kingdom of Heaven

Introduction

Jesus' parables occupy a central place in the interpretation of the Gospel because they communicate theological realities through ordinary experiences, characters, images, conflicts, and unexpected conclusions. C. H. Dodd famously defined a parable as "a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into action" (5). Among these narratives, the Parable of Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16 is particularly challenging. The story describes a landowner who hires laborers at different times of the day but eventually pays all of them the same amount. Those who worked from early morning receive one denarius, while those who worked for only one hour also receive one denarius. The apparent unfairness of this arrangement creates the central tension of the narrative.

The difficulty of the parable has generated a variety of interpretations by scholars which creates a problem. That is why this article used the methodology that has helped in addressing such difficulties. Some few scholars who pointed those challenges are as follows: Firstly, D. A. Carson notes that "some interpreters emphasize divine grace and the equal gift of salvation; others focus on the reversal of social and religious status, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, the inclusion of outsiders, discipleship, or the danger of human comparison" (123). Secondly, Klyne Snodgrass places the passage within Jesus' parables concerning discipleship and emphasizes its relationship to grace and the kingdom (362-78). Thirdly, R. T. France similarly argues that the story challenges the assumption that rewards must always correspond proportionally to services rendered and concludes that "the kingdom operates according to grace rather than human desert" (748). And fourthly, Donald A. Hagner emphasizes the connection between the parable and the preceding declaration that 'the last will be first, and the first will be last,' while also recognizing the importance of divine generosity (570-74). These constitute the problem about this pericope – Matthew 20:1-16.

The reason Ruben Zimmermann's methodology is chosen for this parable is because it provides an especially useful framework for approaching this complexity. Zimmermann argues that parable interpretation should move beyond attempts to reduce every parable to a single proposition. Instead, interpreters should examine the parable as a literary and communicative event in its received Gospel form. His approach integrates historical, literary, socio-cultural, metaphorical, contextual, and reader-oriented dimensions of interpretation (157-82). He understands a parable as "a short fictional narrative related to known reality that, through metaphorical transfer, invites readers to move from the narrative world toward another level of meaning" (170). Craig L. Blomberg similarly contends that "the canonical parables are both more allegorical and more authentic than is usually admitted," and that "a parable often makes more than one point, with each point aligning itself with a central character in the narrative" (51). This insight supports Zimmermann's integrative approach and guards against reductive readings.

Matthew 20:1-16 is not merely an illustration of a predetermined doctrine but a narrative that creates a world in which readers are confronted with their own assumptions about justice, merit, entitlement, grace, and generosity. The central thesis is that passage portrays the landowner as a just and gracious whose goodness disrupts human calculations of merit and reward. The landowner does not abolish justice; rather, he demonstrates that divine generosity cannot be restricted by human notions of proportional deservingness.

Greek Text

8 ὁψίας δὲ γενομένης λέγει ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος τῇ ἐπιτρόπῳ αὐτοῦ· Κάλεσον τοὺς ἐργάτας καὶ ἀπόδος αὐτοῖς τὸν μισθὸν ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῶν ἐσχάτων ἕως τῶν πρώτων.

12 λέγοντες· Οὗτοι οἱ ἔσχατοι μίαν ὥραν ἐποίησαν, καὶ ἴσους ἡμῖν αὐτοὺς ἐποίησας τοῖς βασιτάσας τὸ βάρος τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ τὸν καύσωνα. 13 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς ἐνὶ αὐτῶν εἶπεν· Ἐταῖρε, οὐκ ἀδικῶ σε· οὐχὶ δηναρίου συνεφώνησάς μοι; 14 ἄρον τὸ σὸν καὶ ὕπαγε· θέλω δὲ τούτῳ τῷ ἐσχάτῳ δοῦναι ὡς καὶ σοί. 15 ἢ οὐκ ἔξεστίν μοι ὃ θέλω ποιῆσαι ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς; ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρός ἐστιν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀγαθός εἰμι; 16 Οὕτως ἔσονται οἱ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι καὶ οἱ πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι. (Nestle-Aland).

Literal English Translation

8 And when evening came, the lord of the vineyard says to his steward, 'Call the workers and pay them the wage, beginning from the last until the first.

12 saying, 'These last worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' 13 But answering one of them he said, 'Friend, I am not wronging you. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go. I choose to give to this last one as also to you. 15 Or is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own? Is your eye evil because I am good?' 16 Thus the last will be first, and the first last.

Note: The full pericope is Matthew 20:1-16 however, the above text is the central argument of this article.

Text: Analyzing the Narrative Elements and Context

A parable is narrative. It contains characters, actions, relationships, developments, and often a conflict or reversal (Zimmermann 170). Matthew 20:1-16 clearly possesses these characteristics. The landowner acts repeatedly, laborers enter the story at different times, expectations develop, and the payment creates the central reversal. Joachim Jeremias astutely observed that "no one would ever be crucified for telling nice stories" (12), underscoring the subversive power of Jesus' parabolic teaching. The parable of the workers is no exception: its narrative logic disrupts conventional expectations about fairness and reward.

The pericope of Matthew 20:1-16 cannot be adequately understood apart from Matthew 19:16-30. The preceding narrative records Jesus' encounter with the rich young man, who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus directs him toward radical discipleship, including the command to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow him (Matt. 19:16-22). The disciples are astonished because Jesus' teaching challenges their assumptions about wealth, righteousness, and divine blessing. Peter then asks the crucial question: 'We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' (Matt. 19:27). Peter's question introduces the language of reward.

Jesus responds by speaking about the future renewal and reward of those who have followed him (19:28-29), yet he immediately concludes, 'But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first' (19:30). Matthew 20:1-16 then develops this declaration through narrative. Ulrich Luz notes that "the parable functions as the narrative conclusion to the discipleship discourse beginning in Matthew 19:16, forming a carefully constructed literary unit" (184). The first and last are placed in a situation where their expectations about reward are tested. The first workers have labored longer, but the last workers receive the same wage. At the conclusion, the principle returns: 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last' (20:16).

This literary connection is decisive. The parable addresses the disciples' concern about reward. It challenges them not to understand discipleship as a contract through which sacrifice establishes superiority over later followers. France argued that the narrative forces readers to examine whether their response to others remains governed by human calculations of deservingness rather than by the generosity of the kingdom (748-51).

The narrative structure of the parable is carefully crafted to build tension through repetition and reversal. The landowner goes out at five distinct intervals – early morning (around 6:00AM), the third hour (9:00AM), the sixth hour (12:00Noon), the ninth hour (3:00PM), and the eleventh hour (5:00PM) – to hire laborers. This fivefold repetition creates a rhythm of

gracious initiative: the landowner is not passively waiting for workers but actively seeking for them. His repeated movement between his estate and the marketplace communicates an unusual concern for those who remain outside the vineyard. At five o'clock, when the working day is almost over, the landowner still goes out. He finds men standing idle and asks why they have remained there all day. Their response, 'Because no one hired us,' introduces an important contrast between unwillingness to work and inability to find work. The landowner therefore becomes the agent who creates opportunity.

From a Zimmermannian perspective, the repeated hiring is part of the narrative structure through which metaphorical meaning emerges. The story does not simply announce that God is generous. Instead, it makes readers watch the landowner repeatedly seek workers and eventually include those who have remained outside. The landowner's grace is therefore not an isolated action at the end of the story. It is woven throughout the narrative. His initiative, persistence, inclusion, and final generosity all contribute to the portrait of the just and gracious landowner.

The plot reaches its climax not in the hiring but in the payment. The landowner instructs his foreman to pay the workers 'beginning with the last to the first' (20:8). This reversal of expected order is the narrative engine that drives the parable's surprise. The last hired receive a full denarius first, and the all-day laborers, seeing this, 'supposed that they would receive more' (20:10). Their expectation is natural, even reasonable, within the logic of the story world. Yet they receive exactly what was agreed. The narrative thus creates a deliberate gap between human expectation and divine action, forcing the reader to confront the landowner's startling logic.

The payment scene is the narrative climax. The farmer instructs his manager to pay the workers beginning with the last and ending with the first (20:8). This order is deliberate because if the first workers had been paid first, they might have left satisfied. By paying the last workers first, however, the farmer allows the first workers to witness the generosity given to others. This creates expectation. When the eleventh-hour workers receive a full denarius, those who worked throughout the day naturally expect that they will receive more. Their calculation is understandable within ordinary economic logic: one hour of work equals one denarius; therefore, a full day of work should equal more than one denarius. Yet the narrative does not follow this logic. Each worker receives one denarius.

The complaint of the first workers reveals the deeper issue: 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us' (20:12). The phrase 'made them equal to us' is more significant than a simple complaint about money. The laborers object to equality. They believe that longer service should produce higher status. Their resentment is therefore connected with comparison. They are not merely asking whether their wage is sufficient; they are evaluating their own position in relation to others. This is precisely where the parable connects with Matthew 19:27-30. Peter had asked what the disciples would receive because they had 'left everything' and followed Jesus. Their sacrifice is real, but Jesus warns them against allowing sacrifice to become a basis for superiority.

The central dialogue occurs in Matthew 20:13-15. The farmer says, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?' (20:13). He then says, 'Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you' (20:14). Finally, he asks, 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' (20:15). The final question provides the theological climax of the parable. The Greek expression can be understood literally as asking whether the worker's eye is evil because the farmer is good. The 'evil eye' functions within the narrative as a metaphor for

envy, resentment, or a begrudging attitude toward another person's blessing. The landowner's goodness has exposed the laborer's heart.

Reality: Mapping the Socio-Historical Background

Zimmermann's method requires attention to the realistic world represented by the narrative. A parable is realistic: although fictional, the narrative operates within a recognizable world of landowners, vineyards, marketplaces, day laborers, wages, employment, unemployment, and end-of-day payment (Zimmermann 171-72). The realism enables the audience to enter the story before the narrative challenges its assumptions. William R. Herzog argues that "the parables were meant to subvert systems of oppression and reveal underlying dynamics of power" (3), suggesting that the landowner's behavior disrupts exploitative economic norms rather than merely illustrating spiritual truths.

In first-century Palestine, day laborers occupied a precarious economic position. They gathered in the marketplace at dawn, tools in hand, hoping to be hired for the day. A denarius represented the standard daily wage for a manual laborer or Roman soldier, barely enough to sustain a family. The landowner's offer of one denarius to the first workers was therefore fair and just but not generous; it was the expected wage for a day's work.

The story begins in the marketplace, where unemployed laborers wait for employment. Day laborers depended upon daily work for their livelihood, and failure to secure employment could place a household in a vulnerable economic position. The denarius represented a standard daily wage for a laborer and therefore had considerable economic significance (Snodgrass 369-70).

The first laborers agreed with the landowner to work for one denarius. Their agreement is explicit. The later laborers, however, are promised 'whatever is right' (20:4). The repeated hiring throughout the day creates one of the narrative's unusual features. The landowner returns to the marketplace at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours. Snodgrass observes that "such repeated hiring is unusual from an ordinary economic perspective" (369-70). The eleventh-hour laborers are particularly significant because they have remained unemployed for almost the entire day. When the landowner asks why they are standing idle, they answer, 'Because no one hired us' (20:7). The narrative does not describe these laborers as lazy. They have been available but have not found employment. This distinction is important. The landowner's generosity is not simply a reward for minimal labor; it also represents the inclusion of people who have remained outside the economic activity of the day.

What is historically striking is the landowner's repeated return to the marketplace. An employer who needed harvest workers might hire additional hands, but the narrative's emphasis on five separate expeditions suggests something beyond mere economic necessity. The landowner's decision to pay the last workers first and to give them a full day's wage for one hour's work would have struck ancient hearers as wildly unconventional, perhaps even economically foolish. Yet within the narrative world, this behavior is presented not as foolishness but as the exercise of sovereign generosity.

The payment scene also reflects historical practices. Day laborers were typically paid at evening, as commanded in Deuteronomy 24:14-15. The landowner's instruction to pay the wages publicly, beginning with the last, ensures that all laborers witness the transaction. This public setting transforms the payment from a private business matter into a communal spectacle that exposes the hearts of those who witness it. As Howes observes, the purpose of any socio-historical investigation for Zimmermann is to "explain narrative elements that require such explanation because of the distance between the text and its contemporary interpreters" (4).

Understanding the economic desperation of day laborers and the social conventions of vineyard agriculture thus deepens the reader's appreciation for the landowner's disruptive generosity. Arland J. Hultgren emphasizes that responsible interpretation requires "exegesis and theological reflection on the parables of Jesus as transmitted within the Synoptic Gospels" (1), grounding the socio-historical analysis in the received text rather than allowing external reconstruction to control the narrative's meaning.

The realism of the story therefore establishes an economic world characterized by vulnerability, competition, uncertainty, and dependence. Yet the narrative deliberately introduces behavior that exceeds ordinary economic calculation. The landowner repeatedly searches for workers and ultimately gives the latecomers a full day's wage. This socio-cultural background should not, however, replace the theological function of the story. Historical reconstruction serves the narrative rather than controlling it. The purpose is to understand why the actions of the landowner would be surprising and why the reaction of the first laborers would initially appear reasonable.

Tradition: Exploring Stock Metaphor and Symbols

Zimmermann's integrative method calls for attention to stock metaphors and symbolic networks. A parable is metaphorical: the agricultural and economic world becomes a metaphorical domain through which readers encounter the theological reality of God's kingdom (Zimmermann 170). John Dominic Crossan's literary-historical approach highlights how "parables function as metaphors of the kingdom that challenge conventional expectations about divine activity" (23). Hence, laborers in this context are understood as believers or people Jesus called into God's kingdom. In the same vein, laborers in this context refer to anyone God called to work for him such as Pastors, Evangelists, Missionaries, to mention just a few (cf John 4:35; 1 Cor. 3:6-9; Titus 3:5).

The vineyard (ἀμπελῶν) carries potent symbolic resonance in Israel's scriptures. Isaiah 5:1-7 presents the vineyard as Israel, planted and tended by the Lord, and the image recurs throughout the prophetic literature. Matthew's audience would likely hear echoes of this tradition, recognizing the landowner as a figure for God. The vineyard is frequently used in Israel's Scriptures as an image for Israel and God's relationship with his people. Matthew also employs vineyard imagery in other parabolic contexts, especially Matthew 21:28-46. Consequently, the vineyard can evoke themes of divine ownership, covenant, labor, responsibility, and judgment.

The term οἰκοδεσπότης itself evokes authority and household governance; in Matthew's Gospel, it frequently designates a divine or Christological figure (cf. 13:27; 21:33). The landowner's character is particularly important. He possesses authority over the vineyard and resources. Yet his authority is expressed through generosity rather than oppression. The denarius, as a realistic economic unit, also functions symbolically. It is described not as a gift but as a wage (μισθός), yet the narrative subverts the very concept of wages as proportional to work. The all-day workers appeal to justice — 'you have made them equal to us' (20:12) — but the landowner redefines the terms. 'Take what belongs to you and go,' he says; 'I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you' (20:14). The Greek verb θέλω ('I wish' or 'I choose') emphasizes the landowner's sovereign will. He is not bound by contractual obligation; he acts out of his own goodness — ἀγαθός (20:15).

The 'evil eye' (ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός) that the landowner questions is a stock metaphor for envy and miserliness, attested in Deuteronomy 15:9 and Sirach 14:10. The narrative therefore connects the laborers' complaint with a broader moral and theological problem. The issue is not simply money. It is the inability to rejoice in another person's good fortune. By invoking this

image, the parable diagnoses the laborers' complaint not as a legitimate grievance but as a spiritual malady — the inability to rejoice in another's blessing.

Zimmermann cautions against pure allegory, and his warning is well taken. The parable is not a coded message in which every detail corresponds to a theological datum. Rather, the symbolic network creates a field of meaning in which laborers represent believers and leaders whom God called into his kingdom while the landowner's actions illuminate the character of God without being reduced to a one-to-one cipher. The vineyard evokes Israel's history; the wages evoke covenant faithfulness; the evil eye exposes the human tendency to measure divine grace by the metrics of human merit. The denarius also operates on more than one level. On the literal level, it is a wage. On the metaphorical level, however, it becomes a sign of the surprising generosity of the kingdom. The story subverts the assumption that divine reward must always correspond proportionally to human labor.

The farmer says, 'I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you' (20:14). His θέλω — his choosing or willing — emphasizes freedom. His generosity cannot be dictated by the calculations of those who have worked longer. Yet the farmer does not become arbitrary. He keeps his promise to the first workers. As such, the tension between justice and grace is therefore deliberate. The farmer is just in fulfilling his agreement to the first workers and gracious in exceeding ordinary expectations toward the late workers.

Meaning: Opening up Horizons of Interpretation

Zimmermann's hermeneutic emphasizes that parables possess what may be described as a 'binding openness.' They invite multiple legitimate readings without becoming infinitely interpretable. The parable can generate different meanings while remaining bounded by the narrative itself (Zimmermann xii). Matthew 20:1-16 demonstrates this particularly well. John Nolland warns against reducing the parable to a single theological proposition, insisting that its meaning must be discerned within Matthew's broader narrative framework (805).

The parable resists reduction to a single theme. Readings have emphasized grace, justice, envy, discipleship, reversal, inclusion, and the kingdom of heaven. These interpretations do not compete; they are complementary dimensions of the same narrative. The parable speaks of grace because the landowner gives more than proportional economic calculation would require. It speaks of justice because he keeps his contractual promise to the first workers. The parable addresses envy because the first laborers resent another person's blessing. Similarly, it concerns discipleship because it follows Peter's question about reward. More so, this parable enacts reversal because the first become last and the last become first. Nevertheless, it demonstrates inclusion because those who remain outside the vineyard are brought inside. Above all, this parable is about the kingdom of heaven because Matthew explicitly introduces the story as a comparison with the kingdom.

At the same time, binding openness prevents arbitrary interpretation. The parable cannot legitimately be used to claim that God rewards laziness as a theological ideal. The late laborers are not praised for refusing to work. Nor does the narrative teach that justice is meaningless. The landowner explicitly insists that he has done the first laborers no wrong. The narrative therefore maintains boundaries while permitting multiple theological horizons.

One of the central interpretive questions is whether the landowner's behavior is just. From a purely proportional economic perspective, the answer appears negative. Equal pay for unequal hours seems to violate proportionality. Yet the narrative distinguishes between what is owed and what is freely given. The first workers receive what they were promised. The landowner does them no wrong. The later laborers receive generosity beyond what proportional

calculation would require. Nathan Eubank cautions that "the claim that the parable of the workers in the vineyard eliminates merit and proclaims grace is untenable. Indeed, such a claim asserts a false dichotomy" (260). He further argues that "rather than pitting merit and grace against each other, the parable contrasts payment which is expected and obvious with payment that goes far beyond what is deserved" (Eubank 261). The narrative therefore does not abolish justice. Instead, it places justice within a larger theological category of generosity.

Snodgrass emphasizes that "the parable breaks the assumed connection between work, reward, and human perceptions of justice and places divine mercy at the center of the narrative" (377). The landowner's goodness therefore represents a kingdom logic that cannot be reduced to a system of proportional merit. This does not mean that work is worthless. Matthew's Gospel consistently values discipleship, obedience, sacrifice, and perseverance. The problem is not labor itself but the transformation of labor into a claim upon God. The parable therefore challenges a theology of entitlement. Christian service should be understood as participation in God's kingdom rather than as a mechanism for placing God under obligation.

The concluding statement, 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last' (20:16), provides a structural frame for the narrative. It occurs first in Matthew 19:30 and again at the end of this parable. This inclusion establishes the theological significance of the story. The parable concerns the reversal of human expectations regarding status and reward. The first laborers remain first in the chronological sense: they were hired first. Yet they become last in the payment sequence. The last workers become first because they are paid first. The reversal is not simply a change in economic order. It represents the kingdom's challenge to human ranking systems.

Zimmermann's reader-oriented approach invites consideration of how the parable functions within communities of faith. The first laborers can be understood as representing people who have served for a long time and therefore risk believing that their longevity gives them superior status. The late laborers represent those who arrive later. They may be new converts, new members, outsiders, marginalized persons, or people whose contribution has previously gone unrecognized. The parable does not require a single historical identification of these groups. Its polyvalence allows it to address different community situations while maintaining its central theological boundaries.

In the early Christian community, the narrative could speak to tensions surrounding the inclusion of Gentiles, the relationship between longtime and recent believers, or questions of religious privilege. Yet it should not be reduced exclusively to the Jew-Gentile debate. Its broader ecclesiological force concerns how Christian communities receive people who arrive at different times and contribute in different ways. The temptation is to create categories of 'senior' and 'junior' believers. Those who have served longer may begin to believe that they deserve greater recognition. Newcomers may be treated as less important because of their limited history within the community. Matthew 20:1-16 challenges such hierarchies. The kingdom does not deny the value of long service. It denies that long service gives one the right to resent God's generosity toward others.

One of the strongest contemporary applications of Matthew 20:1-16 concerns meritocracy. Modern societies often organize recognition around productivity, achievement, seniority, credentials, and measurable performance. The parable introduces a radically different logic. The first workers believe that more work should automatically produce more reward. Their expectation resembles a meritocratic system in which outcomes must correspond proportionally to performance. The farmer disrupts this logic. He does not deny the value of work, but neither

does he allow work to determine the limits of his generosity. This is particularly important for Christian theology. If salvation, acceptance, forgiveness, and divine love are treated as wages earned through superior performance, then grace ceases to be grace.

The parable therefore challenges Christians to distinguish between faithful discipleship and spiritual entitlement. A person can serve faithfully without claiming superiority. A church can recognize long service without despising new members. A Christian leader can acknowledge his or her sacrifices without using them to diminish others. The landowner's question remains relevant: 'Are you envious because I am generous?'

For contemporary Christian communities, the parable asks whether longtime members can rejoice when newcomers receive equal acceptance. For instance, whether pastors can rejoice when another pastor receives recognition; can churches welcome people whose backgrounds differ from their own; or whether Christians can celebrate God's grace when it is extended to people whom they consider less deserving. The parable also speaks to economic and social questions. The eleventh-hour laborers are not described as lazy; they are people who have not been hired. Their situation reminds contemporary readers of the vulnerability of those who depend on daily employment. The landowner's generosity does not provide a complete economic theory, and the parable should not be forced into a simplistic political program. Nevertheless, its narrative imagination challenges systems in which human worth is reduced to productivity. The story invites communities to imagine relationships governed not solely by competition and calculation but by generosity.

Conclusion

The Parable of Laborers in the Vineyard, read through Ruben Zimmermann's integrative hermeneutic, demands active reader engagement. Its literary structure focuses attention on the landowner's sovereign generosity; its socio-historical setting exposes the vulnerability of day laborers and makes that generosity more striking; its metaphorical network connects the vineyard with biblical traditions of divine ownership and covenant people while resisting simplistic allegorization; and its co-textual setting anchors it in Matthew's theology of discipleship, reward, and reversal.

The landowner is neither a capricious tyrant nor an irrational economist. Within Matthew's theological narrative, he is a just and gracious landowner whose goodness exceeds ordinary calculations of proportional reward. He keeps his promises to the first laborers while freely extending generosity to the last. His actions expose the fundamental distinction between justice and entitlement. The first laborers receive exactly what they were promised; their complaint reveals the human tendency to measure worth comparatively. Their evil eye is the inability to rejoice in another person's blessing.

Ultimately, Matthew 20:1-16 does not answer the question, 'How much does each laborer deserve?' with a mathematical formula. Instead, it redirects the reader's attention to the character of the one who gives – in this context, God. The decisive statement is not the amount of the wage but the landowner's question: 'Are you envious because I am generous?' (20:15). The parable challenges every attempt to measure divine grace by human achievement. The kingdom of heaven operates according to a generosity that cannot be contained within the calculus of merit. The last are made first, not because they have earned more, but because the gracious landowner chooses to give. The first are not deprived; rather, they are invited to discover that another person's grace does not diminish their own. Therefore, the appropriate response of the disciple is not resentment but gratitude, not comparison but contentment, and not superiority but joy in the goodness of God.

Brief Biography of the Author

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