

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

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THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD: A LESSON IN MERCY AND FORGIVENESS

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At first glance, the parable of the vineyard in which every worker is paid the same seems to contradict our personal workplace experience where everyone is paid according to his own contribution to whatever product or service is being produced. We know at least instinctively that strict justice demands of the worker *a full day's work for a full day's pay* and requires of the master *a full day's pay for a full day's work*.

To reconcile this apparent injustice with our human understanding of Christianity the preacher may argue that the pay schedule of the master of the vineyard focuses not on the contribution of the individual worker but on his basic needs. In other words the preacher is teaching that caring trumps justice and everyone should be paid the same. But that argument fails because such basic needs as food, shelter, and clothing are different for different workers because some have more dependents than others.

The practical virtue of justice properly applied is cold and calculating in that once its demands have been met in the workplace *nothing more* is called for. Justice does not demand that injured workers have their jobs and pay protected by others who take up their work while they recuperate. But that is what caring workmates often do. This seems to be a reasonable fall-back position for the preacher who may be troubled by the different basic needs of different workers.

Caring, however, is not the answer precisely because this Scripture reading is a *parable*, that is a brief allegorical story that is intended to teach some truth that Christians might not otherwise fully understand and embrace. The Scripture begins with "the kingdom of heaven *is like* a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard." The truth to be understood and embraced is not a matter of justice. It's about mercy and forgiveness. All those who confess their sins and beg for mercy and forgiveness enter the Kingdom of Heaven whether they have been faith-filled for their entire lifetime or have come to the Lord at the very last moment. Consider the good thief, Dismus, who admits that he is a criminal and asks the crucified Jesus next to him to remember him in the Kingdom, The Lord assures him that he will enter paradise that very day.

What happens to those who do not turn away from their sinfulness and never ask for mercy and forgiveness? This is, for sure, a profound mystery. Are they cast into hell by a just Lord or have

they been punished for their sins during their life on earth and thereby forgiven by a merciful Lord? All we can say with certainty at the moment is that we will know more about this mystery later.

The wedding feast at Cana, where Mary tells her Son that the host has run out of wine, is a lesson in caring and meeting a need. It is not a parable. It's a strict rendering of what actually happened and is to be taken directly as truth. Likewise, the unmet need of the disciples whose efforts have failed to land any fish is remedied by a caring Lord who tells them to cast their nets on the starboard side of the boat.

There are many such renderings and parables in the Scriptures that challenge preachers and all Christians to understand the lessons that Jesus is teaching either directly or allegorically. The preacher who interprets the parable of the vineyard as a lesson in caring or unmet need is well advised to read Isaiah 55 once more: "Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked his thoughts; let him turn to the Lord for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving."

The Scriptures are telling us that one does not have to be perfect to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Even a criminal can enter paradise provided he truly repents and asks for forgiveness.

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