

Exposition of the Parable
Origen
Translated by M.F. Toale, D.D.
(PG 13, 1337-1362.)

The Kingdom of heaven is like to an householder ...

It seems as if the whole parable was uttered that we might learn that those coming last to work receive the same wage as those that were first called, and that they who first were called were placed last by the master of the vineyard, and were accordingly the last to receive payment. But we must know that if this parable of Jesus, *in Whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Col. ii. 3), be carefully studied, so much wisdom will be found hidden in its depths, by those who have the gift to discover it; so that it must be this parable especially the Saviour had in mind when He said: *I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden from the foundation of the world* (Mt. xiii. 35).

It is necessary for whosoever desires to understand this parable that he first knows what is the day that is here spoken of, and what is the meaning of its hours; and that it was not by chance that the master of the vineyard entrusted the care of his vineyard to five different orders of labourers. Then he must seek out, he that is able to seek, why some of the labourers were hired in the morning; and, after this, not at the second hour, but about the third hour, yet others were hired; and after this again the next hiring was not at the fourth, or the fifth hour, but at the sixth, and so on; not at the seventh or eighth hour, but at the ninth? Lastly, not at the tenth hour, but at the eleventh. For there should be a reason worthy of Jesus why between the morning and the next hour there is but a brief interval and not such as there is between the third and sixth hour, and between the sixth and ninth?

And then why is there but one hour between the ninth and the eleventh, such as there was between the morning and the third hour?

Neither must we pass over the question as to why the householder made a contract of a *denarius* a day with those labourers he had hired in the morning, while to those he hired about the third hour he made no mention of a fixed sum, saying merely: *I will give you what shall be just*. He acted likewise with those he called about the sixth and ninth hours, and to those who had given a reason why they stood all day idle He said likewise: *go you also into my vineyard*. Since the master of the vineyard was standing outside his vineyard, and finding there the labourers, he sent the first into his vineyard, to the second he said: *go you also into my vineyard*, using the same words to those he called even up to the eleventh hour: *go you also into my vineyard*; let him strive to understand who can what is the market places which in Greek is called *nundinae* or ninth day, in which Jesus found men standing idle. Again he must likewise seek to learn who they are whom he found standing there, and to whom he said: *why stand you here all the day idle?* And let him ponder who can the significance of their reply who had stood there the whole day idle; and the pain of standing there idle, and the promptness of their answer: that they were ready to work but no one had hired them; as there were many to be hired, but few to hire them.

And also we must carefully reflect upon what it was that the lord of the vineyard said to his steward when evening was come: *Call the labourers, and pay them their hire*,

beginning from the last even to the first. We must try to understand what was it moved the lord of the vineyard to tell his steward to call the labourers, bidding him pay them their hire, beginning with the last to arrive and then going to the first, so they received payment first who were hired about the eleventh hour, then those that were hired at the ninth hour, in the third place those who were hired about the sixth hour, fourthly, they who were hired about the third hour, and, last of all, they were paid who were hired in the morning early. This is plainly shown from this that he said: *Pay them their hire, beginning from the last even to the first.*

But who is it, apart from the lord who owns the vineyard, that is steward of the vineyard, and who pays the wages according to the lord's bidding? And if they who were called about the ninth hour did not therefore bear the burthen of the day and the heats, then manifestly it was not they who murmured against the householder, saying: *These last have worked but one hour, and thou hast made them equal to us, that have borne the burthen of the day and the heats.*

Neither did they who were called about the sixth hour bear the burthen of the day and the heats, unless perhaps of half a day. And they who were called about the ninth hour did not sustain the burthen of the whole day, but, if one must speak with accuracy, the half of the day and also its quarter. Only they who were hired in the morning, bore the burthen of the whole day and the heat. The rest endured only according to the measure of the time they had laboured in the vineyard.

Since also there are different parables concerning the vineyards, we must inquire whether the vine-yard is here employed in its literal sense, or in different senses. I believe that we should also seek to understand why it was he said, not to all of those who came first, and who thought that they should receive more, but only to one of them: *Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst thou not agree with me for a penny?*

These and similar questions I find contained in the parable before us, to be answered by someone; and it is not for anyone to speak in a manner befitting the parable, other than he who may in strict truth say: *But we have the mind of Christ* (I Cor. ii. 16). This I shall confidently make clear to you. For who indeed has the mind of Christ in this parable, save he that submits himself to the Holy Spirit, of Whom the Saviour says: *He will teach you all things, and bring all things to your mind, whatsoever I shall have said to you* (Jn. xiv. 26).

For unless the Paraclete had taught all that Jesus said, as also this parable, nothing worthy of Jesus could be said concerning it. And if they that search into the Gospel according to John have sought these things from the Paraclete, according to the words of Jesus, some have given heed, not indeed to the Paraclete, but *to spirits of error, and doctrines of devils, speaking lies in hypocrisy, and having their conscience seared* (I Tim. iv. 1), so that they call the spirit of error, and demons, by the great name of the Paraclete, Whom the Saviour had promised to the Apostles, and to whosoever is as it were the equal of the Apostles.

And I am of opinion that Matthew knew all the mysteries throughout this parable, and also those contained in those of the Sower of the Seed, and of the Tares sown among the Wheat, but he did not consider it practical, as in the case of the others, to write about them, for fear that in committing to writing the full meaning, to a certain degree, of this parable,

he would be writing as it were an entire record of the whole. If Matthew is wisely reserved in regard to the unfolding of the parable, it is evident that, if anyone, even in part, can discern this, he is perhaps to be praised; indeed to make known what is disclosed to him, and to put it in writing, will in no way be a hindrance to the exposition of the mysteries.

Now we are far from penetrating to the depths of the things hidden in the parable, but the few that have been made clear to us we venture, and not without earnest prayer, to put before you, setting out briefly some things we have learned, and then having fittingly meditated on the parable we shall go on to other things. Let us therefore first consider what is the meaning of that day of which the parable speaks; let us see also whether we can speak of the whole of this present time as a kind of day, great indeed to us, but of little duration in relation to the life of God the Father, of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. And this present time has the same relationship to the life of the blessed Powers and Virtues, brought together out of many generations. For as one single day is in relation to the life of all long-living things, so is this present span of time in comparison with the life of the heavenly beings. And if it is such in relation to the life of the heavenly creatures, see then of what little moment is this life in comparison with the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Whether such a mystery is referred to in the Canticle of Deuteronomy: Remember the days of old (Deut. xxxii. 7), let him seek out who can. And if such are the days of the world, it follows that a similar meaning is to be given to the words of Psalm 76, verses six and seven: *I thought upon the days of old: and I had in mind the eternal years. I meditated in the night with my own heart: and I was exercised and swept in spirit. Will God then cast off forever?* And perhaps God, if I may speak boldly, will not cast off for ever, for it is a grave thing for the Lord to cast off in one world; but in the other world He may perhaps cast off, when a certain sin shall not be forgiven either in this world or the next (Mt. xii. 32).

Who therefore can relate the six days and the seventh of resurrection to days of this kind, or the sabbath days, and the days of the new moon, and the festival days of the first month, and the fourteenth day of the Pasch, and the other days of Azymes? He who follows reason in this matter will fall into an abyss of opinions, regarding a *day* of this kind after the manner of festival days, or after the manner of that sabbatical year in which God bestowed the fruits which remained from the precious cultivation upon the poor and the stranger, and upon the beast of the field while he is yet suffered to rest (Ex. xxiii). Who is able to scrutinise the number of the days in that sea of fifty years; (I say sea because of the profundity of the teaching here) so that he may know and truly understand the fiftieth year, and what is there laid down to be filled (Lev. xxv).

But in seeking to investigate this one day of the parable before us, and thinking that it is to represent the whole of this present world, we here enter into the deeps, and have need of the Spirit of God *that searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God* (I Cor. ii. 10). I however believe, that as in the end of any year it is said that certain things are to be done, so at the end of many ages, or of ages that complete a certain space of time, Jesus *hath*

appeared for the destruction of sin (Heb. ix. 26), so that at the end of ages, as after the days of a year, a new beginning may then follow on so *that he might show in the ages to come the abundant riches of his grace*, to those to whom He thinks they should be shown (Eph. ii. 7).

These things we have said because of the day commemorated in the parable, which you may confirm from the Epistle of John where he says: *Little children, it is the last hour: and as you have heard that Anti-Christ cometh, even now there are become many Anti-Christ: whereby we know that it is the last hour* (I John ii. 18). For the last hour is after the eleventh hour of the parable that is here before us, for it was about the eleventh hour, according to the parable, that the householder, *going out found others standing there, and said to them: why stand you here all the day idle?*

After this let us inquire whether it was by chance that the lord gave the work of his vineyard to the five orders of labourers? To the first order, when *going out in the morning early to hire labourers into his vineyard*. To the second, when *going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place*. To the third and fourth, when *going out about the sixth and the ninth hour he did in like manner*. And to the fifth, when *about the eleventh hour going out he found others standing, and said to them: why stand you here all the day idle?*

Observe if you can that the first order stands for Adam, and for the creation of the world: for the Householder going out in the morning early as it were hired Adam and Eve to work in the vineyard of His justice. The second order of workers means Noah, and the Covenant which He established with him. The third order signifies Abraham, and those who, following him, were Patriarchs, until the time of Moses. The fourth order is Moses, and all who went with him out of the land of Egypt, and the Law that was given in the desert. The last order, about the eleventh hour, means the Coming of Jesus Christ. The Householder was but one, as the parable records: He went forth five times, and He went forth that He might send into His vineyard *workmen that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth* (II Tim. ii. 15), who would labour in His service. And One is Christ coming frequently among men, ever providing what is needed for the calling of His workers.

Let him that can see if it be not that the five orders of workers form as it were a certain symbol of the visible world, and of that which is perceived by our outward senses. Let him try though he may not wish to accept our notion or opinions. Someone will say that perhaps touch is implied in the first calling, because of which the woman said to the serpent: *God hath commanded us that we should not eat; and that we should not touch* (Gen. iii. 3); the sense of smell is the second, hence in the days of Noah *the Lord smelt a sweet savour* (Gen. viii. 21); taste was signified in Abraham, for when he received the angels at his table he set before them cakes made on the hearth and a calf which he boiled (Gen. xviii. 6, 5); hearing by the age of Moses when, namely, he could hear the Voice of the Lord spoken from on high. Lastly, sight, which is the noblest of the senses is signified by the advent of Christ, when their eyes that behold Christ shall be called blessed (Mt. xiii.

16). I have mentioned these things as a kind of pleasant exercise of the reason or if you wish as a sort of reflection on the five vocations.

I believe that the various tasks of the vineyard needed particular workers for the various hours. For certain things were to be done in the vineyard in the morning early, and the Master of the vineyard saw the workers that were most suitable to the task. In the third hour a work needed to be done, this is the time of Noah, when God made His Covenant with him. Then the ten generations from Noah to Abraham, and ending with Abraham, gave rise to another calling, and the worker of the vineyard now beginning his task was Abraham. And after him came Moses and those who together with him were brought into the vineyard. There remained one last work to be done in the vineyard, one which required a fresh and vigorous vocation, to do opportunely and with expedition that work which remained to be done. This task was the work of the New Dispensation.

The intervals between the third, the sixth, and the ninth hour were equal. And the time between the morning and third hour was similar to that between the ninth hour of Moses and the eleventh of the appearance of Christ Jesus in the flesh. The master of the vineyard agreed to pay a *denarius* to these hired in the morning; which, I am of opinion, is the token simply of salvation, and not to be reckoned with the case of those who were rewarded with degrees of glory; the word *denarius* seems to me but the name of salvation: that which is over and above the *denarius*, wherever it is mentioned, is the coin of the one who multiplied fivefold, and even tenfold, the talent that was given to him.

In saying to those called at the third hour: *I shall give you what shall be just*, he encouraged the workers of the third hour to work as best they could, reserving to himself to judge the payment fitting the work done. He did the same with those called at the sixth and ninth hour, saying also to them: *I will give you what shall be just*. And indeed if they put strength and energy into the work, even though the time should be shorter, they would accomplish as much as those hired in the morning early, but who had become sparing of effort, as happened to those who had been called very early.

Someone may ask, why did the master of the vineyard, going out about the eleventh hour, say, not to those who were simply idle, but to those standing idle all the day, that is for the whole time before the eleventh hour, *why stand you here all the day idle?* I suspect that there is here some deep hidden meaning, concerning the soul, in this idleness of the whole day until the eleventh hour. For though prompt and ready for work, they were not brought into the vineyard; and they pleaded with confidence on their own behalf, saying: *No man hath hired us*. We shall therefore endeavour, depending on certain words of Holy Writ, and from this parable that we are now considering, to show for what reason they stood the whole day idle, who were called at the eleventh hour.

Let those to whom our teaching is not acceptable then teach us the significance of this *whole day*, and the meaning of those who while prepared to work yet stood the whole day *idle*, and were not brought into the vineyard, and dared to answer that accusation by saying: *No man hath hired us*. For if the soul was together planted with the body how did they stand the whole day idle? Or, let them tell us what means this *whole day*, and what mean the various hours of the various callings of the labourers; and whether these latter are

the blessed whom according to the parable the Householder has hired; and whether there were other labourers hired, either by other householders or by the same; and whether they are the blessed, or not the blessed, because of the sublimity of the question can it become known by the mind, or if known can it be written down?

I would also desire to discover the place, outside the vineyard, in which the workers were found by him who went forth to hire them; and I would like to reflect upon whether the place outside the vineyard is not the same as that of the souls not yet united to bodies, or; whether the vineyard signifies not alone the things of this life, but those outside the body, where, I believe, the labourers continue to do their work; for the souls of the labourers employed to cultivate the fields of the householder are not idle after they leave the body.

For Samuel, though separated from his body, laboured prophesying (I Kgs. xxviii) and Jeremiah likewise, praying for the people (II Mac. xv. 14).

Let us labour with great zeal in the cultivation of the vineyard, whether we dwell in the body, or have gone forth from it, and we shall be given a just wage. For, according to the parable, no one who is not prepared to do the work of the vineyard is sent into it; for no one does the householder reprove for work not done, though he has reproved one as to his hope of a greater or lesser reward.

And perhaps that place outside the vineyard is the market place, in which they lingered who stood idle. And they who said that *no man hath hired us*, used a good argument for being considered worthy of receiving the wage of the whole day; on which account he did hire them, and, if I may say so, made a return to them for this that they had stood there patiently the whole day, and had waited until evening for someone who might hire them.

And then as the evening drew nigh, that is, the end of the world and of *the day* spoken of in the parable, the Lord speaks to His steward, or to the one among the angels whose duty it was to bestow rewards, or to one among the many governors, since while the heir is a child he *is under tutors and governors until the time appointed by the father* (Gal. iv. 2).

According to the command of the master, the steward calls the labourers, that he may pay those first who came last: since the first labourers *being approved by the testimony of faith, received not the promise, God providing some better thing for us*, who were called at the eleventh hour, *so that they should not be perfected without us* (Heb. xi. 39, 40). And because we stood there the whole day, and hoped that someone would come to hire us, and because we were idle, and because of the reason we gave we were held worthy that we be given something to do, and accordingly, have awakened mercy, and receiving mercy we hope to receive the reward first, as we expect to become disciples of Christ. Then, moving on, he will give their wage to those who have laboured before us; and then to those who laboured before them, and so on to the first. Should someone look to the place where Samuel dwelt (I Kgs. xxviii. 15), and reflecting on that which was done by those called in the eleventh hour, he will see in what manner they bore the burden of the day and the heats who first were called, and that they who were called at the eleventh hour did not, as they, bear the burden of the day and heat, but they bore the burden of standing idle.

Before the coming of the Master Who said to us: *Come to me, all you that labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you* (Mt. xi. 28), it was a burden to be idle, and not to be

judged worthy to be called to work in the vineyard. And the heats they endured who were called before the eleventh hour, each according to the time of his hiring. The first called not knowing the dignity of the Master of the vineyard, and that they ought not to murmur against Him, believed that they should receive more of salvation than the last come; and they murmured against the Householder, envious of those who came last, who worked but one hour until the evening, and were made equal to those who were called from the beginning into the divine vineyard. To one of them, perhaps it was Adam, the Master said: *Friend I do thee no wrong: didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take what is thine, and go thy way.*

By *what is thine* is meant your salvation, which is the *denarius*. *I will also give to this last as to thee*, He says. He did not say *to these last*, but to *this last*, indicating one, eminent and outstanding; whom, it would be imprudent to say: but they would not be far from the truth who guess that this is Paul the Apostle, who in his *one hour* laboured more abundantly than all the others before him (I Cor. xv. 10). If one must speak as to the meaning of the vineyard, then relying on what was said by Him Who made plain in another parable what is the vineyard, we say that here also the vineyard is the kingdom of God. For as He said in that place: *The kingdom of heaven shall be taken from you, and shall be given to a nation yielding fruits thereof* (Mt. xxi. 43). All therefore who do the work of the vineyard are doing the work of the kingdom of God, and are worthy of salvation, and will be paid the *denarius*.

Having placed before you these reflections on the present parable, there come to our mind certain others which may be of profit to those who seek a deeper and more mystical exposition. It may be said that the whole life of men is but one day, according to the parable, and that they who are called by the Master of the vineyard in the morning early, are they who from their childhood were called to do the things of the kingdom of God.

They who, after they had come to adolescence, begin to serve God are they who are called about the third hour. They who begin as men fully grown are they who were called at the sixth hour. They who in mature age are converted to the work of God are those of the ninth hour, who after the heat of youth, and before the burden of old age, take on themselves the word of the Lord. And the old, who are near to death, are signified by those called at the eleventh hour to labour in the vineyard.

Since it is the purpose that governs life and not the time, which is scrutinised, and in which a man labours in hope: therefore, to every man who labours earnestly, from the time of his calling, an equal reward will be given. Hence they who were faithful from their childhood, who have laboured much, enduring the temptations and difficulties of youth, are grieved at seeing themselves receive an equal reward of salvation with those standing idle from their childhood till old age: standing as it were idle in unbelief, they have come now for but a brief while to believe and to labour.

The vineyard interpreted in this way is the Church of God. The market place that is outside the vineyard means that which is without the Church. Then the Word takes hold of those that are called, and sends them into the vineyard, the Church. According to this interpretation they will not be numbered among the labourers of the vineyard, who though

called first to work in the vineyard, did not remain faithful to its teaching, and being overcome by their passions, they went forth from it; even if after they have had their fill of pleasure they should desire, having done penance, to return again to the vineyard. For they will not be able to say to the Master of the vineyard: *No man hath hired us*. For they were hired when they were first called to the faith. Nor will it be said to these: *Why stand you here all the day idle*, and especially if, *having began in the spirit*, and then afterwards *being delivered of the faith*, they desire to rise again, and to seek afresh the life of the spirit.

But we do not say this, lest we frighten those who are fearful and who desire to rise again, or make more difficult the return to their father's house of those who have consumed the substance of the Evangelical teaching by living riotously; but because of their repentance, and through turning back to a new way of life, they possess better things than those who are still held by their sins; but they are not as those who sinned in their youth, while yet untaught in the things of the faith.

To the last therefore as to the first the Master of the Vineyard wishes to give equally a denarius, that is, salvation: since it is lawful for Him to do as He wishes with what is His, and He reproveth the one that is envious because the Master is good. There will be many of the last first; and some from the first will be last: *For many are called, but few chosen*.

He however that is truly more learned, and has been adjudged by God worthy of more enlightened and more abundant grace in *the word of wisdom, through the Spirit of God*, and in *the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit* (I Cor. xii. 8), and with every help to study this parable, will find in it greater and more sublime things, and expounding the revealed word, will pour out upon it yet more abundant meanings. We however, having delivered to you what we have grasped of the meaning of the parable, if we have failed here in our purpose to explain the meaning of the Scriptures, ask pardon of our readers: and because of our earnest will, and of our not wanting in effort, may we at least be deemed worthy of your approbation. Amen.

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