

## WORKING FOR PAY OR FOR PRIVILEGE?

**Today's Text:** Matt. 20: 1-16

### Extracts:

**So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, "Call the labourers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first." And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day." But he answered one of them and said, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. ... Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?" [Matt. 20: 8-15]**

*Anne Rice is one of America's most read and celebrated authors.<sup>1</sup> Between 1976 and 2003, she wrote and published 18 books on vampires, demons and witches, earning her tons of dollars as a mega-seller. But in 2001, at the age of 61, she returned to her Christian faith (as a Catholic) that she had abandoned as a teenager. She has not published a single vampire book since then. Instead, she has reeled off influential books about Jesus the Christ. Questioned about her new goal, she said, "To be able to take the tools, the apprenticeship, whatever I learned from being a vampire writer, or whatever I was -- to be able to take those tools now and put them in the service of God is a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful opportunity."*

*Anne Rice has put her talents in the service of God and she considers it a wonderful opportunity, a privilege. But can we all say that? Most of us work for pay, whether in cash or in kind. Therefore, we worry over whether our pay is adequate (compared to our wants!) or equitable (compared to our and others' contributions). In the end, we are more distressed than satisfied. So, why then do you work? Is it for pay or for privilege? Let us find out from this week's interesting study, based on the Parable of Labourers in the Vineyard.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on "Anne Rice comes to Jesus,"

<http://www.cnn.com/2008/SHOWBIZ/books/10/31/books.anne.rice.ap/index.html?iref=mpstoryview> and "Anne Rice: Biography," <http://www.annerice.com/Chamber-Biography.html>

## 1. Background: Pay parity palaver

At the junction of La Brea Avenue and Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles, California, USA, there is a restaurant that specializes in Mexican snacks. Each morning, you will see Spanish-speaking men standing in twos or threes, close to the restaurant and the adjacent blocks. They are not there for food or to watch changing traffic lights in that busy intersection. They are daily-paid workers, looking for possible employment by small contractors who are also mostly Spanish-speaking. It is alleged that most of those labourers are undocumented workers (illegal aliens) who will take any pay just to survive. As the day gets older, the groups thin out but even at evening time, you may still see some of them hanging around, suggesting that they have not been lucky to be hired that day. The Parable that our Lord told about labourers that a landowner hired to work in his vineyard comes to my mind each time I drive through that block in Los Angeles. I sometimes wonder if the employment practices of those who hire these labourers are comparable to those of the vineyard owner in our Lord's parable.

Let us examine the landowner's employment practices, which can be summarized as follows:

### a) *Terms of employment*

Just like the labourers in Los Angeles, those in the parable stood "idle in the marketplace" [Matt. 20: 5]. They could be standing there all day unless somebody came there to hire them [vv. 6, 7]. Based on his need, the vineyard owner came early in the morning, presumably at six o'clock, to hire workers. He *negotiated and agreed with them* to pay "a denarius a day" [v. 2]. Around the third hour (9 a.m.), he saw labourers still standing idle in the market place. We do not know if he was hiring out of need or compassion. All we are told is that he said to them, "You also go into my vineyard, and *whatever is right*, I will give you" [v. 4]. The man repeated his visit to the market place at 12 noon and 3.00 p.m. and hired more labourers on the same terms as the second batch [v. 5]. Finally, he passed by at 5.00 p.m. (the eleventh hour) and found that some people were still standing there. He asked why they were still there and they told him that no one had hired them. He told them, "You also go into the vineyard, and *whatever is right, you will receive*" [v. 7]. With the exception of the first batch of labourers hired at 6.00 a.m., the vineyard owner did not specify how much he would pay the rest, except what was right. What was right could be influenced by law (such as minimum wage) or the employer's means or moral standing.

Some of us find ourselves in such circumstances. We are straight out of school and are desperate to get the first job. Due to the current global

economic crisis, such jobs are hard to come by. So, we are forced to stand idly by. Many others have lost their jobs. They have searched for months, if not years, for a new one without success. Some have given up and are standing idly by. In such circumstances, to get a job at all is more pressing than what it pays.

b) *Wages paid*

When it was time to pay the labourers, the vineyard owner told his servants to “pay them their wages, beginning from the last to the first” [v. 8]. All the workers were paid the same amount, that is, a denarius per day [vv. 9-10]! That made the first batch furious, complaining aloud, “These last men have worked only one hour, and *you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day*” [vv. 11-12].

What were they complaining about? Were they paid less than agreed with them? No. They complained about *equity*. In their view, they had received equal pay for unequal work. Would you not have complained also if you had been in their place? I know I would have because it does not look fair at all!

Look around you and you will be discouraged. You work so hard (compared to others) and you have little or nothing to show for it. Your contribution does not even seem to be appreciated. As you eye an opening above your position, they keep filling the vacancies with people that you *consider* not better than you are in terms of qualification or experience. You feel that the system is unfair to you. Let us hear what the landowner in the parable had to say to the grumbling workers. He told the disaffected first batch, “I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? *Take what is yours and go your way*. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?” [vv. 13-15].

He might not have addressed their concerns but he was right! Where has it been proved that the hardest worker is the highest paid? Where is it recorded that the person with the highest educational qualification or longest experience earns the most income? That is why the word of God says, “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skills, but *time and chance* happen to them all” [Eccl. 9: 11]. It was by time and chance that some labourers in the 6.00 a.m. batch were not among those hired at 5.00 p.m.

*Time and chance are out of our control!* Therefore, we can draw from the vineyard owner’s answer the following conclusions:

- The payment to the first batch of labourers was *a wage for work done as contracted*; they worked for pay.
- The payment for the rest could not have been for work done, especially the last batch that was hired at 5.00 p.m. By human standards, it would have been unfair and inequitable. Therefore, those labourers could not have worked for pay but for the opportunity to use their idle time for productive work in the landowner's vineyard. So, their pay *did not depend on work done but on the generosity of the owner*.

Interestingly, the vineyard owner's generosity was tied to the wage of the first batch, a denarius per day, no more, no less. What does that suggest? Let us probe more deeply into the matter.

## 2. But what was being rewarded?

Work can be measured in terms of how long it takes to complete it (in which case, you get paid by the hour) or how much work there is to do (in which case, you get paid for the work done). In both cases, work of equal value receives equal pay. In the eyes of the labourers that worked longer than those hired later, they were of the view that their work should have commanded higher pay. However, there are some jobs, such as those of executives and professionals, which are not easy to quantify by time and output. Also, pay may not be the motive for work, even if it can be measured. For example, work may be a training opportunity, such as an apprentice learning a new trade or an intern in a profession. Some other people work for charity as volunteers or missionaries. In such cases, *your worth* is measured by how indispensable your work is to attaining the purpose of your organization.

In today's lesson, Jesus is referring to labourers in the Lord's vineyard. He began the parable by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early to hire labourers for his vineyard [**Matt. 20:1**]. Therefore; we cannot look at the story through human lenses. Let us look at it from heaven's perspective and the issues become much clearer as the following will suggest:

### a) *The landowner is the Lord Himself!*

Heaven is God's throne and the earth is His footstool [**Is. 66: 1**]. The earth, its fullness and all that dwell therein, are all His [**Ps. 24: 1**]. Since the parable is talking about the kingdom of heaven, then it is talking about the Lord's vineyard. He is the landowner who is looking for labourers to work in His vineyard. In that vineyard, God Himself works, so does Jesus [**Jn 5: 17**]!

We can have a good understanding of the labour in that vineyard when we look back to what Jesus had earlier told His disciples after raising a ruler's

dead daughter back to life [**Matt. 9: 18-30**]. As He went about all the cities and villages, *teaching, preaching and healing*, He was moved with compassion when He saw the multitudes that were scattered “like sheep having no shepherd.” He turned and said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest” [**vv. 35-38**].

Clearly, the Lord Himself is the owner of the vineyard. It is harvest time, the harvest of souls. The work is plenteous, suggesting that the labourers will always be fewer than God requires. Employers will tell you that when you have labour shortage, its quality drops. You use “idle” workers because you have no choice if the work must continue. In like manner, God may not find every worker righteous. In fact, no one is righteous before Him. That is why Jesus says that we should pray the Lord of the harvest to bring more labourers into the harvest.

Who are these labourers? They are soul winners that come in the form of *apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers* [**Eph. 4: 11**]. From the time of creation to the present time, such labourers have come in various forms from among the *Jews and Gentiles*. As we approach end-times, the urgency is much sharper.

b) *Your length of service is not important!*

Just as some labourers were hired at 6.00 a.m. and some at 5.00 p.m., only God can determine when He will call us as labourers. He can choose to call you before you were even conceived, as in the case of Jeremiah [**Jer. 1: 5**], or as a small child, as in the case of Samuel [**1 Sam. 3: 1-10, 19-21**], or in your old age, as in the case of Abraham who was called when he was 75 years old [**Gen. 12: 4**]. God can choose to call you at birth, as in the case of John the Baptist [**Lk 2: 76**], or as a teenage virgin, as in the case of Mary [**Lk 1: 27-33**]. You may already be an established professional, such as Matthew, the tax collector [**Matt. 9: 9**], or a condemned criminal about to be executed, such as the thief that accepted Jesus at Calvary [**Lk 23: 38-43**]. Therefore, your length of service is not important in determining your reward.

c) *Your pay is not countable!*

The labourers in the parable were all paid the same amount, that is, one denarius per day. In like manner, labourers in the Lord’s vineyard are paid the same “amount,” but it is not in monetary or material terms [**Rom. 14: 17**]! When Peter asked Jesus what reward they who had left family and earthly possessions to follow Him would receive, He said they would receive back “a hundredfold” of their earthly blessings “and inherit eternal life” [**Matt. 19: 28-29**].

Earthly blessings are not measured in terms of their volume but the extent to which we can enjoy them. That enjoyment can only come when we use them to glorify God [**Deut. 8: 17-18**]. That is why a good measure of our earthly blessings is the extent to which we demonstrate “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control,” all fruits of the Holy Spirit [**Gal. 5: 22-23**]. None of those blessings can be counted. For example, what is 25% of joy or 1000% of self-control? Joy is joy; self-control is self-control, just as each labourer received a denarius per day, irrespective of length of service.

Ultimately, eternal life in heaven is the reward for your service, no matter for how long. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are in heaven, so Jesus Himself has confirmed [**Matt. 8: 11**]. What did Jesus tell the thief that accepted the Lord at the point of death? He said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, *today you will be with Me in Paradise*” [**Lk 23: 43**]. The reward is the same for all the labourers!

### **3. Conclusion: Salvation cannot be earned; it is a privilege!**

From the forgoing, we see that only the Lord of the harvest, the owner of the vineyard, can determine what reward to give to the labourers He has brought in for the harvest. No matter for how long or how well we labour, we are not responsible for outcomes because we can plant or water but only God can give the increase [**1 Cor. 3: 6**]. Therefore, we are not working for material pay because salvation (another word for eternal life in heaven) cannot be earned. The word of God says, “For by grace you have been *saved through faith*, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, *not of works*, lest anyone should boast, for we are His workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them*” [**Eph. 2: 8-9**]. The whole duty of man on earth is to “fear God and keep His commandments” [**Eccl. 12: 13**]. You can only call Jesus Lord if you obey all He tells you to do [**Lk 6: 46**].

Therefore, as a labourer in the Lord’s vineyard, you are privileged for, as Jesus has put it, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” [**Jn 15: 16**]. So, like Paul in the evening of his life on earth, you should be able to say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” Paul looked forward to the crown of righteousness that Christ had laid up not only for him “but also all who have loved His appearance” [**2 Tim. 4: 7-8**].

In whatever position you find yourself, work as if your salvation depends on it. Like Anne Rice, the American writer, work for the privilege, not for the pay!